



A Tale of the
**Secret
Saint**

NOVEL

4

WRITTEN BY
Touya

ILLUSTRATED BY
chibi



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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The Story Thus Far

FIA, ONCE THE GREAT SAINT in her past life, now hides her saintly powers and leads a new life as an ordinary knight...albeit a life fraught with its own challenges.

Shortly after parting with her black dragon familiar Zavilia, Fia returned to the First Knight Brigade and joined Captain Cyril on a trip to his territory, Sutherland. Fia visited there once as the Great Saint, back when it was the territory of Canopus, her personal knight. The current Sutherland, however, lives in the shadow of an incident that took place ten years prior and left relations strained between the townspeople and the knights.

But things start to change after Fia's absentminded words and actions bear an exact resemblance to those of the Great Saint, causing the townspeople to (correctly) believe she's the Great Saint's reincarnation! To make matters worse, Cyril orders her to go along with it!

While keeping up her "act," she's asked to help some sick people. In the process, a group of townspeople lead her to a cave. This causes a misunderstanding with Thirteenth Knight Brigade Captain Kurtis, who draws his blade on them. Their counterattack leaves him on death's door, but he then regains his memories of his past life as Canopus. Reunited across time with her dear knight, Fia cannot help but shed tears of joy.

Náv Kingdom

CHARACTER LIST



FIA RUUD

Youngest daughter of the Ruud knight family. A princess and the Great Saint in her past life. Currently hiding the fact that she is a saint and living as a knight, but...



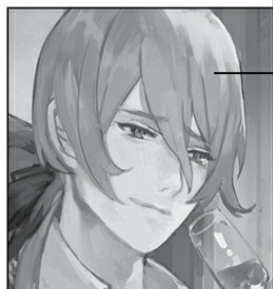
ZAVILIA

Fia's familiar. The only black dragon in the world. One of the Three Great Beasts of the continent.



SAVIZ NÁV

Commander of the Náv Black Dragon Knights. The younger brother of the king and, as such, the heir apparent.



CYRIL SUTHERLAND

Captain of the First Knight Brigade. Head of the most prominent duke family and second in line to the throne. Also known as the "Dragon of Náv." Strongest swordsman in the entirety of the Knight Brigade.



KURTIS BANNISTER

Captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade. Former knight of the First Knight Brigade. Canopus, the Blue Knight, in his past life.

300 Years Ago



SERAFINA NÁV

Fia's past life. Second princess of the Náv Kingdom. World's only Great Saint.



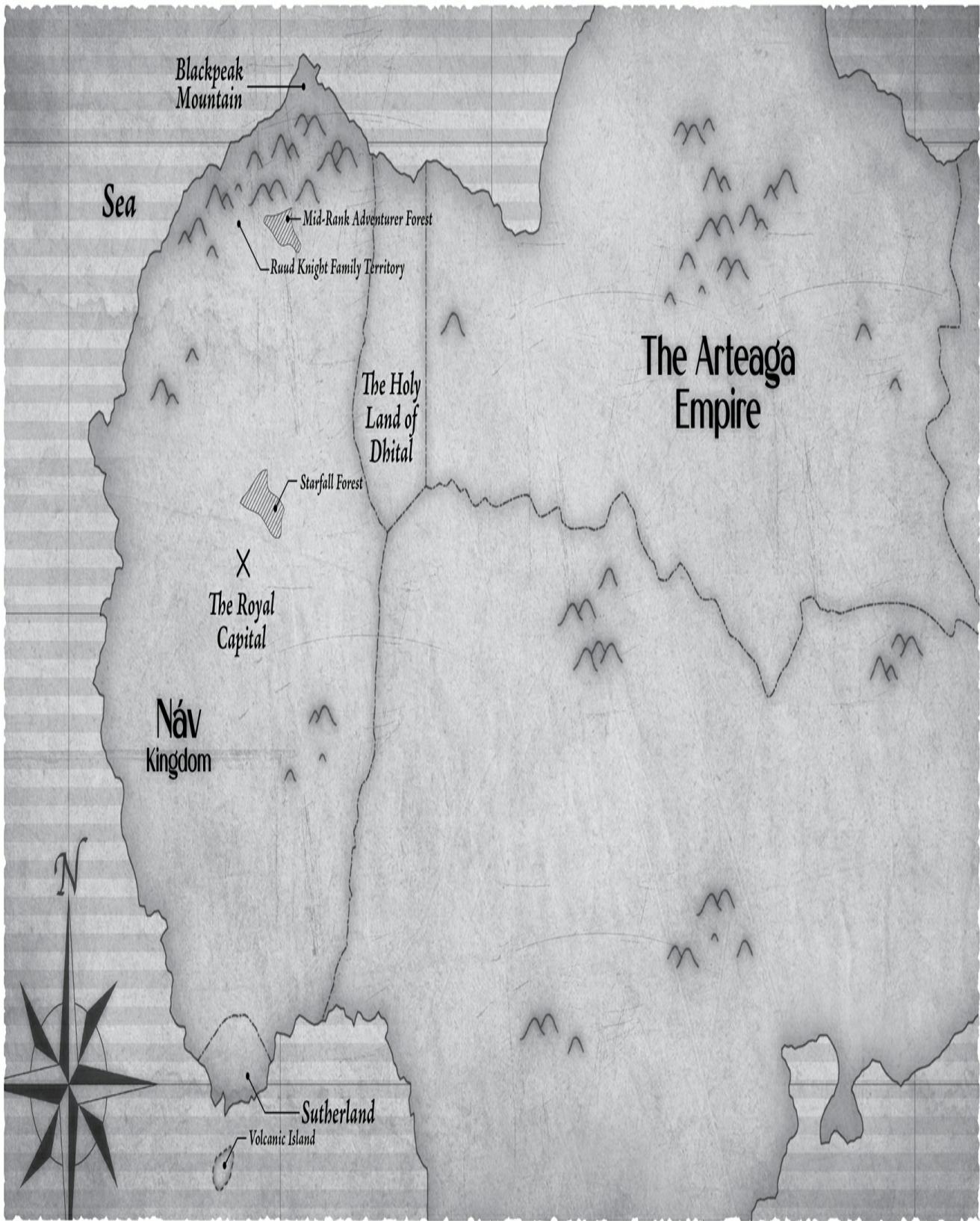
CANOPUS BLAZEJ

Sutherland-born Kingdom Knight. Personal knight of Serafina. Later known as the Blue Knight.

Náv Black Dragon Knight Brigade

COMMANDER: SAVIZ NÁV

	Captain	Vice-Captain	Knight
First Knight Brigade ROYAL FAMILY GUARDS	Cyril Sutherland		Fia Ruud, Fabian Wyner
Second Knight Brigade ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Desmond Ronan		
Third Mage Knight Brigade MAGES	Enoch		
Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade MONSTER TAMERS	Quentin Agutter	Gideon Oakes	Patty
Fifth Knight Brigade ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Clarissa Abernethy		
Sixth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY	Zackary Townsend		
Seventh Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, NORTH			
Eighth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, EAST			
Ninth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, SOUTH			
Tenth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, WEST			
Eleventh Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR NORTH	Kurtis Bannister	Cody	
Twelfth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR EAST			
Thirteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR SOUTH		Dolph Ruud	
Fourteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR WEST			
Fifteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Sixteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Seventeenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Eighteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Nineteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Twentieth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			



Chapter 29:

Yellow-Speckle Fever

THE HANDKERCHIEF Canopus had given me was now soppy with my tears, but he didn't seem to mind. His hands continued to hover uncertainly about me, but it was still familiar. It made me feel like it really *was* him, and that calmed me.

Then I saw Ariel prostrated behind him and returned to my senses.

"A-Ariel! I'm so sorry, I forgot about you!" I exclaimed. Canopus extended out a hand as I hurriedly tried to stand up.

What a gentleman, I thought proudly. My personal knight is a fine example of his profession.

No sooner did I think that, however, than he opened his shapely lips and said, "Her Holiness kindly allotted you time to pray, and that time is up. Allow me to send you to the next world now!" Without a moment of hesitation, he drew his sword.

"W-wait, no!" I grabbed his arm. *I take it all back! Gentleman, my foot!* "Don't hurt them!" I shouted frantically. "Ariel and the rest weren't trying to harm me! And I'm not the Great Saint anymore, I'm just a knight!"

"What are you saying?" He gave a meaningful look to his nearly healed wounds. "You are clearly still the Great Saint, are you not?"

"Hngh..." I had no idea what to say. "L-Let's just put that matter aside for now. Um, anyway...no hurting Ariel and the rest, okay?"

He closed his eyes and returned his sword to his scabbard with a loud clack. "Very well. If that is your order, then...I have no choice but to obey." His voice was flat now—he'd calmed down. The force with which he sheathed his sword showed that he wasn't exactly happy about it, but his anger subsided quickly.

He always did have a firm grasp on his emotions.

I tapped his arm. "I'm sorry for pushing you on this. I know you're just trying

your best to protect me, and I thank you.”

“Please...my emotions are of little importance. Order me as you please. I live to serve you.”

“Right, um...totally. Let’s put that matter aside for now too.” I sighed and turned to face Ariel and the others. “Could you all stand up please? I’d like you to show me to the sick.”

Ariel and the others stood up lightning quick, and Ariel fell into a deep bow. “We beg your forgiveness. We were fools to have shown Your Holiness all this violence. After this matter is settled, we will take our own lives as repentance. This knight needs not dirty his own hands.”

Flustered, I said, “Wh-what?! Why would you even think of taking your own lives?! L-Let’s all just calm down a bit here, um...none of that! I’ll be very cross with anyone who does this whole repentance death thing!”

Ariel’s eyes began to tear up for some reason. “Oh, Your Holiness...to think you would extend such benevolence to us good-for-nothings...”

“Of course she would!” said Canopus proudly. “Her Holiness is the most beautiful and benevolent person in the world! Your comprehension of her greatness is as limited as that of an insect facing the sun!”

I looked up at Canopus with a weary look, but Ariel and the rest were nodding along vigorously. “It is as the knight says!” Ariel exclaimed. “Forgive us for harming you earlier, sir. We only intended to protect Her Holiness, but our actions were inexcusable. Please, allow us to tend to your wounds.”

“No need,” Canopus said. “’Tis but a flurry of scratches.” Everyone worriedly eyed his white knight uniform, red with blood from his wounds. He then walked forward as though unharmed, stopping shortly behind me and standing tall as though waiting to serve me. He moved with confidence, showing no sign of being wounded or even affected by any of this. Ariel and the others still looked a bit worried, but what could they say? He said he was fine, after all.

Before they could ask any questions about the ties between me and Canopus, I continued from where we left off. “Erm, so...am I correct in thinking those people laying down over there are the sick?”

Ariel seemed to return to his senses. He lowered his head humbly and spoke. "It is as you say. In total, we have fifty-two afflicted here. Those touched lightly by the sickness are still delirious with high fever, and those in critical conditions are largely unconscious."

"I see..." I went around and examined the three townspeople in critical condition, secretly halting the progression of their disease while pretending to simply check on them. But as I touched their bodies and felt my healing magic circulate through them, I noticed something strange. Their sickness was indeed the yellow-speckle fever, but something was off.

"We still have the special healing potion Her Holiness prescribed us years ago," said an elderly woman. I turned and saw her squatting at the foot of one of the patients' beds. She had a white robe on, so she was probably a saint. She rose to her feet, staring at me, and then deeply bowed her head. "I am Saliera, a saint. It is with much gratitude that I welcome Your Holiness to Sutherland."

"Nice to meet you," I said with a bow. "I am Fia Ruud." When I lifted my head, however, Saliera still had her head bowed. "U-um, please, raise your head. Whether or not I'm really the Great Saint's reincarnation is still up in the air. For now, I'm just an ordinary knight."

Only then did she raise her head. With both hands over her chest and a serious look in her eyes, she spoke. "But you are Her Holiness, are you not? You have such brilliant, dawn-like hair, and you have returned right at our hour of need. How could you not be Her Holiness..." Her expression was stiff.

Agh, this was overwhelming. "W-well, uh, r-right," I stammered. "You know what? I just might be the Great Saint after all."

Hearing that, she began to tear up. "Oh...you've returned after so much time, and just when the adela flowers are in bloom. It is as you promised. Your Holiness, I do not wish to trouble you, but I beg you, please save our people once more." She again bowed deeply.

"I-I'll do what I can!" I said, nodding my head vigorously. "Um, these people are infected with yellow-speckle fever, right?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid that might not be the case," she muttered weakly. "If it were yellow-speckle fever, then the special healing potion you

prescribed us years ago would have worked.”

“Many have contracted yellow-speckle fever over the past three hundred years,” Saliera explained, “but they all recovered with the special healing potion you left us.” She hesitated for a moment. “This time, however, the special healing potion has no effect. I’m afraid this illness might be something else. Or perhaps I have the ingredients or the preparation method for the potion wrong...”

She looked so hopelessly sad that I had to comfort her. “Not at all, Saliera. The healing potion you’ve made is fine. It’s the disease that’s mutated over the many years.”

She raised her head and took my hand in hers. “T-truly? It’s not my fault that these people suffer so? Oh, thank goodness... Thank you, Your Holiness.” She looked to the passageway opposite of the cavern’s entrance. “This is where the afflicted come to die. The disease has proved incurable. Hundreds of us have already gone through that final passageway. There, they are returned to sea. We cannot risk returning the bodies to their families and spreading the disease.” Her expression softened, and tears began to stream down her face. “I’m so glad Your Holiness is here now. I’ve long since been at my wit’s end. Saint though I am, I’ve been so useless. You say the disease has mutated, but I cannot even confirm that. I am powerless here...”

I understood Saliera’s feelings so much it hurt. Nothing felt worse than being unable to help someone sick despite being a saint. I stepped forward, but Canopus blocked my way.

He stared down at me with a grave expression. “Lady Fi—up until a short while ago, I was planning on eradicating these insolent townspeople to protect your identity. But if you’d prefer to, ah...spare them, allow me to call you ‘Lady Fi’ for the time being as a precaution.”

“Wh-wha—*eradicate*?!” I was about to comment on his word choice, but maybe having this conversation with all the townspeople around was not a great idea. I opted to move things along. (Come to think of it, I’ve been putting off *a lot* of things with him. I swear he wasn’t always such an eccentric man.)

Anyway, for the time being, I would play along with Canopus—or *Kurtis*, as I should say. “Right. Then allow me to call you ‘Captain Kurtis’ as a precaution.”

He objected to that, however. “Please, adding ‘Captain’ is unnecessary. Just call me ‘Kurtis.’ And you need not speak so formally to me.”

“I can’t do either of those things! I’m just an *ordinary* knight, remember?” I protested.

Jeez, Captain Kurtis, I thought with a little sigh. *If we have to steer the conversation back on topic every couple of seconds, we’ll never get anywhere! And where’d your common sense go? Don’t you understand our respective ranks?!* I glared at him in sheer exasperation.

He met my glare with composure, then gave me a levelheaded nod. “In that case, allow me to resign from my position as captain so you can—”

“Fine, I’ll just call you ‘Kurtis’ from now on! There, you happy?!” *H-he’s not joking! Knowing him, he might actually do it!*

Hearing me say his name without title, he gave me a deeply satisfied look. “Splendid. Now, allow me to check if you have your priorities straight. The actions you’re about to take, are they consistent with your reasons for being a knight?”

“That’s...well...I suppose they’re not.” Thinking about it now, he had a point. Everything I’d done so far had helped me avoid detection, including how I refrained from using spirits to cast my healing magic. After all, the demon lord’s right-hand man might still be out there, waiting for me to be reborn as a saint.

I could heal the townspeople without using spirits, which would keep me from being discovered, but I would still be outed as a *real* saint. I’d have to deal with being given a higher position and having a bunch of eyes on me, and I might even end up having to use spirits at some point anyway. Then it would only be a matter of time before the demons caught wind of me.

Phew, I’d almost lost sight of things because of the sick people here in front of me. If I died, there would be nobody to help these people at all. Still, it hurt to not be fully honest—to be a true, golden-hearted saint like Saliera.

I sighed and glanced up at Kurtis. Come to think of it, I hadn’t told him a thing

about my situation. Maybe I should keep the part about the demon lord's right-hand man a secret for now. He seemed to know I'd been killed in the demon lord's castle, but I doubt he'd know the details. I certainly didn't want to make him worry about me any more than necessary. He'd just insist on protecting me if I told him, maybe even following me out of Sutherland.

Yeah, that sounds like a bit much, so let's not tell him. It's not like I'm in any immediate danger or anything. New plan: I'll whip up a healing potion for the townspeople. If I can't heal them directly, I'll just heal them indirectly! I nodded to myself, having a clear goal in mind now. I looked Kurtis in the eyes.

"If you need new ingredients for the special healing potion," he said hesitantly, "I could go collect them for you."

My eyes shot wide with surprise. *My, such a capable man!* I hadn't said a word, and he was still able to grasp exactly what I wanted, and he took the initiative to volunteer assistance.

Huh? But how did he know...? I tilted my head in confusion, watching his expression now. He knew I was a saint, so wouldn't it make more sense for him to suggest I use my healing magic? But he'd stopped me when I was about to use healing magic earlier too. Did he know that I was hiding the fact I was a saint, even without hearing all the details from me? And wasn't it awfully prudent of him to use a fake name more similar to my current one instead of Serafina? Just how much did he know?

Too many mysteries! "Psst, Kurtis," I whispered. "You know I'm hiding the fact that I'm a saint?"

"I have my memories from when I lived as Kurtis and can piece together the facts. I am also fully prepared to spare no expense in supporting you in your endeavors."

My, such a capable, splendid gentleman! Could do with a bit less of the overbearing loyalty, though. "Erm, haven't you become a bit...uh...how do I put it? You used to be the kind of guy that would correct me when I made a mistake. Shouldn't you be asking me *why* I'm hiding that I'm a saint? How do you know my reasons aren't something silly? Isn't doing what I say without question no better than blind obedience?"

He furrowed his brow. “Lady Fi...please try to remember. Even in my past life, I avoided questioning you as much as I could, so as not to burden you.”

“Huh?” *Come to think of it, he might be right, I thought. Wait, then where’d he get all the information he needed? I could swear he knew me better than I knew myself...*

He seemed to notice the confusion on my face. “When I came to serve by your side, I learned about you from those around you,” he explained. “I hope to serve by your side once again, with your permission.”

“Uh...” *He means for the duration we’re in Sutherland, right?* He wasn’t going to stick glued to my side, surely, not when he hadn’t even heard about the demon lord’s right-hand man. He wasn’t my personal knight from three hundred years ago, not anymore. He was just...Kurtis. Right?

Just as he was Kurtis now, I was no longer Princess Serafina. There was no reason he’d want to be my personal knight again. With that in mind, he obviously meant that he only wanted to serve me while we were here in Sutherland.

Fine by me! “Hee hee! Of course you have my permission. I’ll be in your care, Kurtis.”

Quietly, and with reverence one might expect from a clergyman witnessing a miracle, he performed the knight salute and bowed his head deeply. For the first time in a long while, I saw the sheer elegance of his gestures and nonchalantly thought—*yup, that’s someone who served a princess for ya*. I didn’t notice the intense determination in his eyes, or just how much my words meant to him.

“Now then, shall I go procure the ingredients you need?” Kurtis asked, still down on one knee. For a moment, I was stunned by his overwhelming politeness.

I soon calmed down, though, and realized it would be a problem if he, a captain, continued to treat some ordinary knight like me with all this respect. “Um, Kurtis? The Knight Brigade has a very strict hierarchy system, you see, so...

As captain, you probably shouldn't be treating me with all this reverence."

I was fully prepared to explain everything about the "caste" system of the Knight Brigade to Kurtis, but he cut me off with a well-timed counter question. "Oh? That's odd. I heard from Captain Cyril that Captain Quentin of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade treats you with great respect."

Oh, no. "Ngh..." *H-hey, Captain Quentin doesn't count! He's a total outlier! Gah, that man doesn't even need to be here to cause me trouble, does he?* I racked my brains for a rebuttal but came up empty-handed. I just let out a sigh of defeat. *I guess I'll have to concede this whole politeness thing for now.* As long as Kurtis could use Quentin as a precedent, he'd be pretty stubborn about it. *This is going to be a long battle...*

In the end, I decided to ignore what Kurtis said and answer his first question. "Um, so, we were talking about ingredients, weren't we? The yellow-speckle fever seems to have mutated into a bit of a problem. To cure it we'll need..." A realization dawned on me. I gave Kurtis a wink. "Uh...I mean, I *think* we'll need to search the forest for something *yellow* and *valuable*."

As Kurtis had pointed out earlier, it'd be a problem if it was known that I was a saint, so I cleverly made it look like I didn't actually know what ingredients were needed. I'd cut it pretty close, but I think I just barely avoided outing myself. It hadn't occurred to me before, but knowing *exactly* what ingredients the new special potion needed would be a little too suspicious coming from a supposed non-saint. I had to get Kurtis to specify the ingredients *for* me.

I trusted he could figure it out. He was my ex-personal knight (and was effectively my knight once again, although only temporarily). I spent more time with him in my previous life than anybody else. We knew each other like the backs of our hands. I was certain he'd be able to figure out what I meant, no problem!

With absolute faith, I gazed up at him. He returned an understanding nod and, with complete confidence, said, "I hear you loud and clear, Lady Fi."

Yes! That's my ex-personal knight for you! I thought with pride. *You understand me better than I understand myself, don't you?*

With utter confidence, he added "We need yellow mithril, yes?"

Ugh. “Huh?! *N-no!* Kurtis, listen carefully! Something *yellow* and *valuable*! Surely something else comes to mind...?”

I tried to correct him, but he—the man who should know me like the back of his hand—just frowned. “It’s not yellow mithril...? How strange. But you could make a fine sword out of yellow mithril...unless you mean some firm yellow bamboo instead? Certainly, yellow bamboo does have an elegant straightness to it and can even function as a weapon if need be.”

“You—why have you only been thinking about weapons?! Jeez, what I’m talking about is something yellow and valuable! Something even girls and children love!”

“Ah, but of course! You mean the fang of the Yellow Emperor Beast! Why, even the daintiest of womankind could wield a short sword crafted from that!”

Oh, come on! I began to raise my voice. “I just said I’m *not* talking about weapons! I’m talking about flowers! Specifically, the flower petals of the yellow snowdrop!”

*How could he be so dense?! Out of all the rare and valuable yellow things in a forest, the yellow snowdrop was rarest and most valuable! It only grew on the largest tree in a forest, so you had to first search a whole forest for a *single* tree to find it. It stood to reason that a yellow, valuable something could *only possibly* refer to the yellow snowdrop!*

I grumbled to myself and glared at my blockhead of an ex-personal knight. He had already moved on, however, and was thinking of how to collect the yellow snowdrop. “The yellow snowdrop...” he said, with some hesitation. “Yes, I see. I believe I could prepare it for you in half a day, but I couldn’t possibly leave you alone. Could I entrust you to Captain Cyril’s care first before leaving to collect this ingredient?”

“No, no, you don’t need to waste time worrying about me. I’ll be fine waiting here with Ariel and Saliera.”

Generally, he always obeyed what I said without question. Not this time, though. “Lady Fi...” he said, frowning, “I have done something for which I must implore your forgiveness. In fact, I should have asked for your forgiveness the very moment we met in this life, but I thought that discussing such matters in

front of others would be troubling for you, given your...current circumstances.”

“Uhh...” I had a fairly good idea of what he wanted to apologize for, but *that* whole mess simply wasn’t his fault. But before I could say anything, he continued.

“There is a fear in me too, tied to that for which I must apologize. You see, the very thought of leaving your side terrifies me.” Something awful must’ve crossed his mind, because his face quickly began to pale.

“Wh-whoa, K-Kurtis?! Are you okay? You look terrible!”

He put a hand over his mouth and hunched over painfully. “And I feel just as terrible. Ah...I’ve imagined being here in front of you time and time again. Now that I actually am, though, I find myself woefully unprepared. I am still far too green.”

“Wh-what? You’re a fine knight! Nothing green about you. I don’t know what you’re imagining, but I don’t think it’s healthy. Try thinking about something else, like...the taste of cake waiting for you after a successful diet!” It was the first thing that came to mind.

“A true diet...has no end,” he said, his voice faltering but confident. “Someone who caves in and breaks their diet should probably find other alternatives to losing weight.”

“U-urk. Okay, how about you imagine something simpler? Maybe...being surrounded by beautiful women fawning over you. Doesn’t that put a spring in your step?”

“Multiple women? But why? Just one woman is enough for me. Besides, there are none more important to me now than you. Just the thought of being encircled by women frustrates me...ah! But now I understand. Wonderful, Lady Fi. Talking to you has calmed me down already. I see you chose these topics carefully to direct my attention elsewhere. Thank you.”

“I, uh...” I *was* trying to help him calm down, but I wasn’t trying to do it like that. I was thinking he’d start drooling over the thought of food or all the women, not be *annoyed* back to his senses.

Kurtis straightened and wiped the sweat off his brow with his knight uniform

sleeve. After releasing a large, grandiose sigh, he gave me a troubled look. “Truthfully, I have misgivings at the thought of leaving you, even in Captain Cyril’s hands. But I just know that if I don’t find this new ingredient, you will choose to heal these people at the risk of exposing your secret.”

“Then why don’t I just come searching with you? Two heads are better than one.”

He shot me down in a heartbeat. “I appreciate the kind offer, but I would recommend against this course of action. While I do intend to protect you from anything that may come, it would most certainly be safer for you to stay here than to join me in that monster-infested forest.” He seemed to steel himself with determination and went back onto one knee. “I know this option isn’t without risk, but...I shall do what you ask of me. I will procure your ingredients at once. Please wait here until I return. Although, I’m sure you wished to stay with the ailing townsfolk in the first place.”

Watching him stand up with a renewed drive, I called out to him worriedly. “Kurtis, you’re not planning on going alone, are you? This is the yellow snowdrop we’re talking about. You’ll need help to search the deep forest and to deal with the vicious monsters there. Wouldn’t it be better if I came along in case anyone got hurt?”

“At the risk of repeating myself, there is something you are trying to hide, yes?” he said, frowning. There was a thoughtful look in his eyes. “If so, I do not believe it wise for you to join me for such a reason when others might be present, but...” He trailed off, turned to face me, and then bowed his head once again. “I do not mean to be so insolent as to think I know better than you, Lady Fi, but I believe there are times one has to make sacrifices. One cannot save everyone. There will be moments you must consider what is most dear and protect it, even at the cost of losing all else.”

“O-oh, of course...” I nodded my head quickly to show I understood. He was hinting that what *should* be “most dear” to me was my own life. I got where he was coming from, considering his past life’s duty, but did he understand that *he* was dear to me? And here he was, about to enter the deep forest all by himself...

But he read my heart like an open book. “Don’t worry, Lady Fi,” he said in a calming whisper. “I am from Sutherland originally, and the lay of its land is familiar to me. I’ll take the shortest path possible and be back by your side before you know it.”

He bowed deeply once again before quickly pacing over to Ariel and grabbing him by the collar. “I *kindly request* that you look after Lady Fi! She is the one who *might* be Her Holiness, so you better not let so much as a single hair on her head come in harm’s way! Oh, and I further *request* that you forget every word of this conversation!”

Requests? Those definitely sounded more like threats. Still, Ariel nodded furiously. “Y-yes, sir!” he squeaked.

Kurtis gave one more threatening glare before bolting out of the cavern.

Captain Kurtis wasn’t always this strange, was he...? I sat myself atop a comfy-looking boulder and pondered.

Just as I’d regained memories of my prior life, back when I was almost killed by Zavilia, Kurtis regained his memories after he was almost killed by Ariel and the rest. ...Then again, I guess it could’ve been right before that. After all, I couldn’t imagine Kurtis drawing his sword on the townspeople unless he’d regained his memories already. He was likely full of regret after I died in our past lives, so he’d be willing to do anything to protect me in this one.

Either way, his memories had only recently returned, and someone would normally need *days* to process the overflow of memories that suddenly appeared...at least, I did. Some memories didn’t process at all until much, much later. With that in mind, it was no wonder he was acting so weird. His memories were a jumbled mess. The kind thing to do here would be to overlook his oddness.

I nodded approvingly to myself, having figured out a good explanation for Kurtis’s weirdly subservient behavior. It would only be a matter of days before he returned to normal. Hopefully. It’d be a problem if he stayed like this. In this life, I was as ordinary a knight as they came. Having a knight captain get all subservient would make me stand out in a very, *very* bad way!

Still, I was convinced he'd get back to normal in a few days, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

With that done, I called out to Ariel and the others, who'd formed a comfortably spaced protective ring around me. "Pardon me, Ariel. You're the chief's grandson, right? Am I right to suppose that's why you're the one managing the sick here?"

Ariel leapt with surprise at the sound of my voice. He waved his hands at me, flustered. "Y-Y-Y-Your Holiness, y-you needn't take such a polite tone with me! If you show me such politeness, I'll have no choice but to prostrate myself out of sheer guilt for the violence I've shown you!"

"Wh-what?" I said. "But I could never dare be rude to you."

"Ah! I can't take it anymore! Your Holiness's kindness is too much for my undeserving self to bear!" With that, he fell face-first to the ground with a *thump*.

"Wh—Ariel?! Are you okay?"

"Guha!" He dug his face deeper into the ground.

I hurriedly changed my tone. "Pull yourself together, gosh darn it!"

"Ah...I feel better already." He looked up from the ground, showing me his dirt-caked face. He smiled weakly, but there was nothing reassuring about the gesture, what with all the dirt on his brow, on his cheeks, and even in his nose.

"Wh-what's up with you all of a sudden?" I said, more than a little put off. "You didn't care about my tone at all before!"

He paused for a moment, as if going over my words to make sure I'd dropped any unnecessary politeness. Then he swiftly stood up and said, with a straight face, "When I first met you, my foolish, base self was unable to recognize you as the Great Saint. When I later learned your identity, I was too preoccupied with begging your forgiveness to think further. It was only after I calmed down that I realized how unnatural it was that you'd been so kind."

"Um, Ariel, you realize I'm just somebody who *might* be the Great Saint, right?" I said, a little forcefully. I couldn't let anybody know my identity yet.

He gave me a deliberate, knowing look. “If that is what you wish, then so it shall be.” He’d heard my talk earlier, after all.

Also, that’s a pretty fancy way to say you don’t believe me... I puffed up my cheeks and glowered, resting my elbow against my knee with my chin on my hand. Without much thought, I let spill a question I’d bottled up for a while now. “So...why do the people of this land worship the Great Saint so much? She’s only visited once, and that was three hundred years ago.”

Ariel looked at me with some surprise. “Have you forgotten your own deeds? What you’ve done for our people? How you healed the yellow-speckle fever and saved us from the brink of extinction?!”

“That wasn’t *me*. It was the Great Saint. Besides, it’s no big deal. Chefs cook meals and a Great Saint heals people. That’s just what w—what they do. What saints do.”

“I daresay you’re the only one in this world who would proclaim such a th—hngg!” Suddenly, he clutched at his chest, his face contorting into a pained look.

“Huh? A-Ariel, are you all right? Does your chest hurt?” I quickly stood up and approached, only for the others to start similarly clutching at their chests.

“Yes, my chest hurts,” Ariel said. “For you see, I fear that the depths of Your—of *Her* Holiness’s benevolence is too much for my heart to bear.” The surrounding townspeople silently nodded in agreement.

This is getting out of hand, I thought, watching some of the townspeople begin to shed tears. I did promise Cyril and Kurtis (before he recovered his memories, at least) that I would pretend to be the Great Saint’s reincarnation, and it seemed my overflowing dignity and nobility had allowed me to succeed at just that—but this reaction was way too overblown...

“Three hundred years is a *really* long time, y’know,” I said. “No matter how grateful you guys might be for the whole yellow-speckle fever thing, don’t you think it’s about time you got over it?” They were so grateful after these hundreds of years, as if they themselves were the ones I’d healed.

With one hand still clutching his chest, Ariel nodded. “Yes, the event itself is long past. But if it weren’t for Her Holiness’s benevolence, our people would

not be here today. The first and most important thing we learn as children is of the benevolence of Her Holiness. Our fathers, our mothers, our neighbors—they all remind us that we exist only thanks to Her Holiness's blessing and that we must one day repay the favor."

"Wha-*huh*?!" Well, then! Hadn't expected *that*.

He paid me no mind. "The history of my people is a history of oppression. We are weak individually, so we act as one. Oppression against one is met with resistance from all, and a favor bestowed to one is paid in full by all. But...what are we to do for a favor granted to our kind as a whole, especially when a means of repayment lies forever out of our reach?" He stopped there, looking to me for an answer.

"Uhh..." I pounded my fist against my palm. *Eureka!* "Why not pretend nothing happened and forget all about it?" The moment I uttered that, however, everyone frowned with great displeasure. "H-hey, you guys are the ones who asked! Don't they say there are no wrong answers?"

Ariel shook his head. "In this case, there is but one right answer: Accept that the debt we owe will grow for all eternity, with no hope of repayment. It is all we can do to pray that Her Holiness returns someday...and do anything we can to repay her then, even though we know that our debt shall forever remain."

Faced with several pairs of somber eyes staring at me, I gulped. *Wh-what do I do? The situation is way more serious than I thought.*

It wasn't unusual to receive gratitude for healing others, but *this* level of gratitude was something else. I didn't know if the former islander peoples were just the hardcore dutybound sort or if their gratitude for the Great Saint got exaggerated over the generations, but this had all blown way out of proportion.

"Um, that's, uh..." I frantically racked my brain, then thought up a most practical solution. "Okay, how about this? Just say 'thank you' and leave it at that. Saying 'thank you' is how you get your gratitude across to others, yep! You'll be able to get your feelings off your chest *and* the other party will be happy to be thanked. Best part is there's no need to do *anything* further."

Ariel and the rest replied with weak, slightly confused smiles.

Wow, okay. I see how it is. You all just said you would do anything to repay the Great Saint but now you're flat-out ignoring my suggestion, even though you believe I'm the Great Saint...

I guess their gratitude couldn't be expressed with only a couple of words. Calming down a bit, I glanced at Saliera.

Fine. If everyone's going to ignore me, this Great Saint will just ignore them back! That's when it hit me: In the end, we saints only had each other to lean on, right? So maybe I should just get friendly with Saliera!

My eyes met Saliera's. Her expression was serious—I think she'd been staring at me the whole time. Which was a good thing, right? She wanted to make eye contact, and everybody knows that eye contact is important in fostering a strong kinship. Clearly, we were going to get along swimmingly!

Thinking that, I quickly pranced over to her. "Excuse me, Saliera, is there anything I can help you with?"

"My, Your Holiness! Please, you mustn't use such polite language with me either. Ariel is next in line to be chief, as his father is gone from this world. If you treat the people of this land with a politeness that even he doesn't warrant, you'll undermine his authority." Saliera closed her eyes and bowed.

"Huh? I-Is that how things are? I-I didn't know." I turned around. "Then maybe I should speak politely to you after all, Ariel?"

Ariel shook his head back and forth with frightening speed. "A-a-a-a-a-absolutely not! Such a thing would be unimaginable! There are some things in this world that must not be changed, and this is one of them! If you were to begin speaking politely to me, I would have to never appear before you again out of sheer fear of disrespecting you, Your Holiness!"

"I, um...I hate to sound like a broken record, but I'm only someone who *might* be the Great Saint, okay? I'm not even a *regular* saint! As for any memories of being the Great Saint, I've got nothing." I knew Ariel was suspicious of me after hearing my conversation with Kurtis, but I couldn't concede this one point. Similarly, it seemed the tone I treated these people with was something they

couldn't concede. But, since I was a mature young knight, I supposed I'd allow it. It was only fair that both sides make some concessions. "Uhh, yeah, all right then. I'll talk casually to all of you like this. I hope that's okay with you, Saliera, with you being my elder and all."

"Oh, but of course, Your Holiness!" she replied.

Like I said, I'm only someone who might be the Great Saint. It was starting to get annoying having to correct them constantly, so instead I smiled politely and approached her. "The air flow is just right in this cavern, huh? So many entrances for the wind to come in from, and it never blows too strong. You've chosen the perfect spot for keeping the ill."

Considering these people were quarantined immediately after showing symptoms, some of them must've spent several weeks here. Despite that, all of their clothes were clean, and the air was still fresh. Saliera's kindness and attentiveness were readily apparent. I'd thought that modern saints were all the arrogant sort, so it made me happy to see that true saints like her were still around.

I smiled at her, and she modestly shook her head. "Thank you for your kind words, but protecting those that Your Holiness saved long ago is simply my humble duty."

"I... Thank you, Saliera." Her words resonated deep inside me. *How wonderful to see that such a saint still exists...*

She frowned sadly. "No, Your Holiness...I have failed in carrying out my duty. In the past three hundred years, yellow-speckle fever has periodically sprung up in this land. Many became infected, but the special healing potion Your Holiness left us healed everyone each time. Until now. After the first infection half a year ago, not a single person has recovered."

"Saliera..." Her expression was so deeply, painfully sad.

"I've already had to return hundreds of my people to the sea since then, and yet none have blamed me for my failure, although they certainly could. I understand that this illness is out of my hands, but I can't help but think there must be more I can do. The chief has already accepted our fate. He's even said that the past three hundred years that Your Holiness's benevolence granted us

was miracle enough.”

I was at a loss for words. There was so much I wanted to object to, but I didn’t know where to even *start*.

“That’s why we’ve chosen to live as though nothing was wrong,” she continued. “We’ve chosen to go to work as normal, eat as normal, do our seasonal events as normal... We even hold our festivals. We’ve come to accept this deadly yellow-speckle fever as part of our lives. But that doesn’t change the fact that one must separate from their family for good once symptoms appear...” She clutched her chest and continued in a trembling voice. “The chief won’t say it, but I’m sure he believes this disease to be our divine punishment. We haven’t repaid our debt to Your Holiness in the slightest. Far from it—we broke our vow of pacifism and fought the duke and the knights. This cannot be anything but divine punishment.”

“A disease is a disease, nothing more,” I said. “Nobody is at fault. This is no punishment.”

Occasionally, those with serious diseases tried to find meaning or reason for their afflictions, but the people of this land were just trying their hardest to live. How could that possibly be their fault?

“You’ve all struggled enough as it is,” I muttered as I approached one of the sick. I had already used my magic to stop those in critical condition from worsening, so there was no immediate danger. The rest had been well cared for by Saliera and needed no help from me. In other words, there was nothing I needed to do right now...yet I found myself stepping forward regardless.

I walked over to a small, sick girl. My eyes had been drawn to her—she was the only child here—and to the furi-furi flowers above her head. I knelt down and picked one of them up.

“The children delivered those flowers,” Saliera explained. “They can’t come in here, of course, so they hand them to the lookouts at the entrance of the cave.”

“I see.”

Furi-furi flowers were an ingredient in fever-reducing medicine, but they weren’t used in the special healing potion for the yellow-speckle fever. Not

knowing that, the girl's friends brought them hoping they'd be of help, even daring to enter that basilisk-infested forest...

I thought back to the looks of fear on the faces of those children back in the forest and to their looks of joy as we walked around the town's shops. They were a cute, energetic bunch, willing to put themselves in harm's way to help their friend. I swore to myself that I would heal these sick if it was the last thing I did.

I closed my eyes and put my hand on the girl's forehead to take her temperature. She was burning up. I frowned, and she opened her eyes.

Staring at my red hair, she whispered hoarsely. "Your...Holiness?"

It would be cruel to correct her. "I'm here. How do you feel?"

"Your Holiness's hand...it feels real nice... I'm happy." She looked at me with wide, serious eyes. "Will I get better now that you're here?"

I nodded firmly. "You will. My friend is going to bring some herbs for me. I'm going to make a healing potion and cure you."



Hearing this, the girl closed her eyes and smiled. With her fever as bad as it was, my hand must've felt cool and comforting. I quietly stroked her head for some time until she began to doze.

Relieved, I returned to my boulder seat and waited numbly. Eventually, a voice called out to me from the entrance.

"Lady Fi, I am sorry for the wait. I have returned." I turned to see Kurtis there with two bags, one big and one small. "I was more out of shape than I expected. I'll need to retrain myself when I have the time, it seems." He held the bags out to me.

"Huh? Y-you're back already? It hasn't even been half as long as you said you'd take. Did you really get the petals of the yellow snowdrop? And you're sure you didn't pick another flower?" I opened the larger of the two bags; it was filled to the brim with actual petals of the yellow snowdrop. "Wh-what?! You got them! You got *a lot* of them! Don't tell me you climbed the tree for all this?"

So that's why he was commenting on being out of shape. But...he'd have to climb to get this many. That doesn't seem like bad shape to me at all!

"Kurtis, I think you're in fine shape as you are..." I said, opening the smaller bag...and immediately starting to sputter. "K-K-K-Kurtis, wh-wh-what...?!"

"I came across a number of monsters on the way," he said casually. "These are their magic stones."

Terrified, I stared at him. I was shocked beyond words. The small bag was filled with magic stones of various sizes, numbering in the dozens. The biggest was around the same size as the A-rank monster magic stone Zavilia had given me some time ago.

In such a short span of time, Kurtis had found the unknown location of the yellow snowdrop, climbed its tree to collect it, and defeated a bunch of monsters, including an A-rank monster?

"Wh-what in the world are you?!" I stammered.

"Your knight," he said, with perfect calm. "Ever faithful."

No...this is completely beyond the scope of something any knight can do! I

thought. Then and there, I decided to stop caring about trivial things like Kurtis's excessive politeness and suchlike.

I passed the small bag brimming with magic stones back to Kurtis and slumped my shoulders. Then, wordlessly, I picked up the big bag.

Let's just...try to not think about it. I'd just focus on making the special healing potion and nothing else. "Saliera, can you help me make this healing potion?"

"But of course," she said, and from there on she was glued to my side. My plan was to have her memorize how to make the special healing potion so she could make it herself in the future.

I walked toward the exit connecting to the ocean. "Normally, we would use spring water for healing potions, but why don't we use seawater this time? Since everyone has such a close bond with the ocean and all." I took a container I was handed and filled it with seawater.

Saliera gave me a surprised look. "Y-Your Holiness, is it really all right to change the ingredients for such a reason? Shouldn't the ingredients be specific to the recipe?"

"Mmm, generally, yes. But there's nothing wrong with changing the ingredients to match the patient. Some ingredients are more effective for some cases and less effective for others. Using an ingredient the people of this land would be familiar with would be best here, I'd say."

"That's the first I've heard of that theory..." she muttered, amazed. "Why, I've never even considered changing an ingredient to one the patient's body might be better attuned with..."

Oops. I might've overstepped a little there and stood out too much. Thinking back on it, I was the only one who did stuff like this, even in my previous life. Others understood it in principle, but they all claimed it was unrealistic to put it into practice.

I blinked a few times and put on my best innocent face, trying to steer the topic away. "Oh, actually, uh, I read in a book somewhere that the petals of the yellow snowdrop pair well with seawater. Yep. Love to read!"

Good thing I noticed my error quickly. If I'd gone ahead and made this special healing potion lickety-split, it would seem a little too suspicious. Someone might wonder how I knew the exact recipe for the cure, and I couldn't very well answer that I'd just now analyzed the disease with healing magic when I stopped the three worst-infected patients' conditions from worsening. Yeah, I needed a different way through this bind...

As I worried over that, I returned to the main room and saw Kurtis. *Oh, of course! Sorry, Kurtis, but I'm going to make you be my scapegoat.*

I put on a clueless look and batted my eyelashes. "Thank you for collecting these ingredients, Kurtis. But, umm, how am I supposed to use them?"

Unfortunately, my ex-personal knight didn't pick up on my intent at all. "I'm sorry?" he said, giving me a confused look. "I'm afraid I don't know that. I simply collected as much as I could, sepal and all, as I wasn't sure—"

"Oh, of course!" I loudly exclaimed. "You're supposed to use the petals *and* the sepals! Wow, Kurtis, thank you so much! I would've thrown the sepals away if you hadn't told me!"

Finally understanding what I was doing, he scrutinized me with a weary eye and murmured faintly to himself. "I...see. So she does these 'performances' in this life as well. I take it she wants me to play along with these terrible—er... *lacking* attempts at acting that even a child could see through?"

"Wha—hey!" I protested. *Even if you whisper, I can still hear you, you know?! And I'll have you know I am a terrific actress!*

I reflected back on my past life, to the time I visited Sutherland because I wanted to see the ocean on a "whim" and "just so happened" to stop by and cure the yellow-speckle fever. All the knights besides Canopus had been absolutely taken in by my acting. I still remember the great surprise they showed. I mean, they were *really loudly* surprised, saying stuff like "Wow, never in a million years would I have thought such a terrible disease was here! What a crazy, random happenstance!"

Remembering their faces brought a smile to my lips even now. The fact that I could so thoroughly surprise such levelheaded knights was sure proof of my acting ability. Canopus might be able to see through me as he was always by my

side, but *nobody* else could pin that down!

I continued to grumble under my breath as I followed Saliera to the preparation room, holding the container of seawater in my hands. The room was far smaller than the space the sick were kept, but it had a variety of herbs hanging from above and a number of dried goods stored in baskets. As far as preparation rooms went, it was a pretty good one.

“Ahh, the smell of herbs never fails to calm me down!” I scanned the room. “Let’s see, we only have fifty-two people to prepare for, so we shouldn’t need too much. Err...it’s my personal belief when making healing potions that simple is best, so let’s start off by adding the furi-furi flowers into the seawater. We normally wouldn’t use furi-furi flowers, but the children went out of their way to collect them, so we might as well. Next, we add the core of a hare-serpent...” I clearly voiced each step so Saliera could remember. “Finally, we add the petals of the yellow snowdrop!” I took two handfuls of the petals and dropped them into the seawater container.

I turned to Saliera to check whether she caught all that...only to see her staring back at me in a daze.

“U-um, Saliera?” Maybe I’d moved too fast for her to follow.

“Do you...not need to measure the quantities?” she asked, amazed. “I know some healing potions lose all effect if the proportions aren’t correct. Should we not be measuring by the milligram?”

“Oh, you’re free to if you like,” I replied. “There’s nothing wrong with that. But just estimating is fine too. You don’t need to get the quantities down perfectly as long as you adjust how much effect is extracted from the ingredients.” She gave me a questioning look, so I added, “It’s a matter of ratios. Say, for example, you need ten parts seawater and one part furi-furi flower. If you were to slip up and instead use ten parts seawater and *three* parts furi-furi flower, you could fix it by only extracting one-third of the furi-furi flower’s effects. That way, the ratio is effectively ten parts seawater to one part furi-furi flower.”

“Forgive me, Your Holiness, but...I cannot seem to wrap my head around this concept. How are you supposed to correct a mixture if you don’t know the ratio

of those ingredients?”

“Well, you don’t really *need* to know the ratio if you know its intended effect. Just use your healing magic as you make the potion, and you’ll come to understand those effects. From there, you can tell if the intended effect is lacking and use your healing magic to adjust the output of the ingredient.”

She sighed. “Your Holiness, I fear that none but you could possibly do such a thing. One would need unimaginable talent to carry through such a task, and that’s without even considering the difficulty of balancing multiple ingredients and multiple effects... Such a feat is not within the realm of mortals.”

“Huuuh?!” I tilted my head. “It’s not like this is resurrection magic. I mean, we’re just mixing a potion to cure a disease! I’m pretty sure anyone could do this with some practice.” After all, I could do it.

But...hmm. Now that I really thought about it, it *did* take a lot of practice for me to learn the ropes. I couldn’t exactly force Saliera to go through all the grueling training I underwent in my previous life, no way. Hmm...maybe she was right? Then again, you can’t get anywhere without a little practice. Every journey begins with a single step!

With that in mind, I gave her an encouraging look. She returned me a timid one.

“It might not be as impossible as you think,” I insisted, putting the container with all the ingredients in front of her. “Are you ready to give it a try?”

As I was not (openly) a saint, she was the one who’d need to create the potion.

I kept guiding her through it. “Okay, now sink both your hands into the seawater. Think of all the people here you’ve cared for. Think of their fevers and their pain, of their endless coughing fits. Isn’t it terrible how they grow sluggish as their temperatures rise, until eventually their consciousness fades? And now think of how wonderful it would be if all that were to just...disappear.” As I spoke, I took her hands in mine beneath the seawater. “Envision these ingredients. First, there is the seawater. The seawater of Sutherland that has protected your people all your lives. It flows within your body and without. Next, the furi-furi flower. Can you feel it soaking into your body? Cooling your

fever?”

I continued to explain each ingredient, guiding her into thinking of the ingredients’ quantity, function, and such. But strangely, I couldn’t feel her healing magic. *Oh dear.* Discreetly, I let some of my own healing magic flow into the mixture.

Yeah, come to think of it, this special healing potion was a lot harder to make than the one I’d made last time, even with the quantities taught beforehand. Maybe making this was actually really hard for other saints?

Th-that can’t be, though! This is the easiest way to mix these sorts of ingredients! There were other methods that less-skilled saints could use, sure, but the ingredients involved were a lot harder to come by. *Is this really so hard?*

I got a bit flustered during the process, but we ended up with a fine special healing potion regardless.

“W-well done, Saliera!” I said, putting a little pep in my voice to cheer the broody-looking saint. “You completed the potion!”

Even in the dim cavern, with only torches for light, the potion in the container sparkled with a clear shine. “It would appear so. How nice,” she murmured dryly.

She carefully poured the potion into the 52 small glass cups on the table. When she was finished, she put a hand over her chest and stared at the potions, deeply moved.

“I’ve split it into 52 portions,” she said. “The children will receive half the dosage of the adults. None of Your Holiness’s special healing potion will go to waste...and this is all I am capable of doing to help.”

She sighed miserably. Eep! How was I supposed to cheer her up?

When she looked up at me, though, her eyes regained some of their vigor. “Forgive me, Your Holiness. I have no right to be so dejected after you’ve prepared such a valuable potion for us.”

“Not at all. If you’re sad, it’s okay to express that. And really, uh...who made

this potion anyway? Because it sure looks like it was you, right? Not me, because I totally do not have saint powers.” I may have done most of the work, but Saliera used her healing magic a bit, so she should take credit.

But while that’d be convenient for *me*, would it cause *her* trouble? Flustered, I quickly added, “O-of course, we don’t *have* to do that if you don’t want to! You know, sometimes some mysterious, unseen power comes into play and before you know it, bam! There’s a new potion!”

She gave me an exasperated look. “Perhaps such is normal for you, Your Holiness,” she said quietly, “but I cannot say I’ve seen anyone make a new potion without saint powers. If I had such an ability, I’d offer my sincerest gratitude up to the divine powers and would never dare to hide it.”

I was speechless. *Uuuuh, am I being reprimanded for trying to hide my saint powers?* I was about to plead my case—I mean, who wants to be misunderstood by such a kind, hard-working saint—but I clamped my mouth shut when I saw that she had more to say.

“Your Holiness did not hesitate at all to create this potion to help the sick,” she said. “There are none I have met who embodies the spirit of a saint like you do, Your Holiness.”

“Huh?” Her tone was so gentle. Maybe I wasn’t being reprimanded after all? Unable to make heads or tails of it, I decided to just stay quiet and listen.

“But regardless of that fact,” she said, “you’ve persistently claimed to not have any saint powers. This humble saint cannot hope to understand your goals, but I’m sure you have your reasons for hiding what we both know. Keeping such a secret must be unbearable. Your heart is so saintly, and you possess such magnificent power. I cannot begin to fathom the conflict that must rage within your soul.” Her voice choked up, as if she felt every word of it herself.

“U-um, about that...” I stammered, flustered. *You’re right, but not completely.* The whole “raging conflict within” thing was a bit of a stretch. I’d used my saint powers a number of times already when it seemed necessary, but even then, it was less like I was revealing myself and more like I’d kinda forgotten to hide.

Saliera seemed to have created this lofty image of me in her mind, and I was a

little hesitant to crush it. Things would be so much easier if she could just read my mind... Oh, if only!

“Your Holiness,” she said, looking frightfully grave, “allow me to be of some aid. Whether it be in maintaining your guise, or by pretending to be a more capable saint than I am, I shall assist.”

“O-oh, thanks! Yeah, that’d be a huge help!” Overjoyed to have some support, I happily took her hands and squeezed. Some color came to her cheeks as she smiled.

The two of us put the potions onto some trays and returned to the room with the sick. Kurtis appeared, lickety-split, and took my tray off my hands. Ariel appeared shortly thereafter and grabbed Saliera’s tray too.

My, such gentlemen! I gave a satisfied nod and got to distributing the potions. The three in critical condition weren’t fully conscious, so I fed them the potion while they were still laying down. The rest of the sick were able to sit themselves up and drink. Those who could sit up were helped with that by the townspeople guards.

The sick all stared at the glass cups I handed them, peering down at the bottom and seeing the red sheen in its liquid. They narrowed their eyes as they looked into it, as if it was like staring into the sun, and exclaimed stuff like, “It’s the red of Her Holiness!” “To think we’d receive your benevolence again, even though we’ve failed to repay you for three hundred years...” “Thank you, Your Holiness.” That sort of thing.

They’d then hold the glass reverently, deeply bow their heads toward me, and drink the potion in one go. At which point they’d bow deeply yet again with utmost gratitude.

For the umpteenth time, and hoping it’d be the last, I explained myself to one of the townspeople. “Hi there! Just, y’know, for the sake of clarity, Her Grace Saliera is the one who made this healing potion. I’m, uh, well... The chief says I might be the Great Saint’s reincarnation, but I actually don’t have any saint powers! It’s all very confusing, and you probably just, uh, shouldn’t think about it.”

“I understand,” they replied, “Your Holiness.”

...*Do you, though?* I thought. I had my doubts whether *any* of the townspeople were really on the same wavelength as me. Still, that was the last potion I needed to give, and Saliera was about done too. I scanned the area, confirmed that nobody was showing any sudden, adverse reactions, and then returned to the young girl I'd talked to earlier and sat down by her pillow-side.

She opened her eyes as I came close and smiled warmly. "Your Holiness, it's much easier for me to breathe now!"

"Huh?! I'm pretty sure this potion doesn't work *that* fast!" I exclaimed. Creating a potion with an instantaneous effect was a much more complicated process. For cases like this, where there was little immediate mortal danger, I generally preferred slow-acting healing potions. Besides, it was gentler on the body.

By all accounts, the potion shouldn't have taken effect yet. Still, the girl sat up with vigor and even proceeded to try and stand. "I really am feeling better, Your Holiness! I feel like I could even run really fast if I wanted to."

"Err, I think you're mistaken, so it's best you don't. This is just the placebo effect at play. You're only thinking you're healthier."

I tried my best to convince the girl when Ariel and the other guards approached. After they saw the girl sitting up, Ariel stiffened sharply. "M-Myu?! Y-you can sit up?!"

"Oh, Father! Yeah, I feel better now after drinking Her Holiness's potion!"

"Nope!" I broke in. "Like I said, that's the placebo eff—"

Before I could finish, however, Ariel and the other men all fell to the ground in prostration. "Your Holiness!" they exclaimed as one. "Thank you for saving everyone!"

"Huh? Um, but the potion's the slow-acting type—" I tried to correct them, but my words fell on deaf ears.

Ariel even talked over me! "All of us guards have at least one family member who is suffering from that terrible illness. We all volunteered to work at the risk of infection just so we can be near our loved ones, knowing full well they could pass away at any moment! Never in my life did I expect the day would come

when we'd see our family healthy again..."

Wow. He was in tears. Totally overcome with emotion. Great. But—

"The healing potion hasn't taken effect yet, okay?! Look, none of their yellow speckles have faded! It'll be at least two hours before anyone is cured!"

"Oh, you are too kind, Your Holiness! I understand completely! We should have everyone rest two more hours, *just in case!*" he said, with an inexplicable wink.

Talking to a brick wall would've been more productive.

Exasperated, I began to cover my tracks. "Ariel, there's something I need to make *very* clear to you, seeing as you'll be the next chief. First, the one who made this special healing potion was Saliera. Sa. Lie. Ra. Got it? Second, I don't have any saint powers. Zilch. Zero. Could you make sure to tell everybody that?"

"B-but of course! I will do whatever you wish of me, Your Holiness!"

So he said, but I doubted that he truly understood. I stared at him unblinkingly, but he just returned a confident look. In the end, I had no choice but to trust him.

Two hours passed. I left the cavern, joined by all fifty-two of the now-cured townspeople, Ariel and his dozen or so men, Saliera, and Kurtis.

I held hands with Myu, and together we walked the path to her home and chatted about what she wanted to do now that she was healthy again.

We reached the town streets, only to find them in commotion...but not the kind of commotion I'd seen at the festival. The townspeople were all shouting frantically and running about. I watched, confused, and then the townspeople saw me...and all froze in shock.

After a brief lull of silence, they all cried out: "Your Holiness!"

"Y-yes...?" I replied, a bit taken aback. While I was still wildly confused, the crowd parted and made way for a knight in a white uniform—the uniform of both the knight brigade captains and vice-captains. I knew exactly who it was

but avoided looking them in the face. I really did *not* want to be lectured right now.

Not that looking away actually did anything. “Fiaaa!” The white-uniformed knight called.

Yep! That’s me! With resignation, I looked up at his face. “Why, if it isn’t Captain Cyril! Whatever are *you* doing here?”

I smiled *very* naturally, pretending I hadn’t noticed him till just now. He returned me a piercing, unblinking stare that said he knew otherwise.

“Fia, where have you disappeared to for all this time? Just when I thought you’d learned your lesson after I had to drag you back to the mansion after the mess this morning, you’ve gone and vanished!” The closer Cyril got, the more worried he seemed. “Do you know how many hours it’s been? It’s almost sunset!”

What’s his problem? I was an adult and could take care of myself. Besides, we knights are free to spend our time as we please on festival days like today. What reason did he have to fret over me like I was some kid?

“Do you not remember how we discussed that we weren’t sure how those with red hair would be treated?” he asked. “That’s why you were to stay with either Kurtis or me, for safety.”

“Ack.” Come to think of it, we *had* discussed something like that, hadn’t we? Totally slipped my mind. But that was all before the townspeople thought I was the Great Saint’s reincarnation, so things were different now... That’s the excuse I wanted to use, but there was no way it’d fly.

The right thing to do *would* have been to check in with Cyril beforehand and gain permission to head out alone. I looked at Cyril’s face, his brow furrowed with worry, and felt keenly that I was in the wrong here.

Arguing my way out of this one would be impossible. He was too eloquent for me to debate him, and the odds were stacked against me. The best thing to do would be to cut my losses and apologize, so...

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” I said. “Um, after leaving the mansion, I went around the festival shops with some children. I ate sugared grilled fruits, amber sweets, cotton candy, egg on bread, and...a bunch more stuff. After that, the kids went home, and I was alone.”

Cyril opened his mouth, and I quickly continued before he could get a word in. “That’s when I met Ariel, who is, well...the chief’s grandson. He and some others tried to kidnap me but made a mess of it, so I decided to just follow them of my own accord. Around then, Captain Kurtis secretly followed *us* and later got attacked by Ariel and the others...”

“What on *earth* are you saying, Fia?” Cyril broke in. “They tried to kidnap you and you *followed them*?! And what’s this about Kurtis being attacked?! He did seem even more worried than me when he left to search for you, but...” He trailed off when he saw Kurtis step forward from behind me.

Oh, right, I thought, remembering just how disheveled Kurtis looked now. His pure white knight uniform was dark red with his own blood. Of course, he stopped bleeding a while ago, but there was still hardly any white left on his uniform. Losing that amount of blood really should have been fatal.

“I’m fine, Cyril,” said Kurtis. “I was only lightly wounded.”

Cyril stared at him, mouth agape. I couldn’t tell whether he was shocked by Kurtis’s newly casual tone, the utter certainty with which Kurtis insisted he was only “lightly wounded,” or the way Kurtis simply had the air of a completely different person about him. Could’ve been any, could’ve been all.

But Kurtis showed no interest whatsoever in Cyril’s shock, instead looking to me as though awaiting my orders.

I returned to my senses and looked at the swarm of townspeople forming around us. From among them, Radek, the chief, ran forward in something of a panic.

“Your Holiness, you’re safe!” He lowered his head in an exaggerated fashion, then noticed I was holding hands with Myu and went wide-eyed. “M-Myu? I thought you were sick. Should you not be in the cavern with your father...?”

Radek went silent, stepping forward and dropping to a knee before Myu. He

rolled up her sleeve and checked her palm and arm. “Th-the yellow speckles are gone...!” he exclaimed.

Slowly, he looked up and behind Myu to see all the other townspeople he thought he’d never see again. No yellow speckles covered their skin, but tears of joy ran down their cheeks. Every one of them stood on their own two feet, healthy.

Radek turned to me, trembling. “Y-Your Holiness...”

“Your Holiness!” Before I knew it, all the other townspeople were on one knee, calling me by my old title, Great Saint.

Only Cyril, Kurtis, and I were left standing. Thinking this was disastrous, I looked to Ariel for help. “A-Ariel?!”

With a start, he seemed to return to his senses and stood up. “W-wait, Grandpa—I mean, Chief!” he said to Radek. “Miss Fia is Her Holiness, but... um...” Failing to find his next words, Ariel looked to Kurtis for help.

Kurtis met everyone’s eyes. “It is as Ariel says. Even if Lady Fi might be Her Holiness’s reincarnation, she is but an *ordinary knight* now. She possesses none of the miraculous powers of Her Holiness and is, in fact, *not* Her Holiness herself. *Am I clear?*” A mysterious intensity emanated from him, an aura that precluded any protest. Everybody—even Ariel and the chief—swallowed nervously and kept their silence. They all looked to me for help, though, clearly disagreeing with Kurtis’s claim.

I felt their gazes but averted my eyes. I couldn’t be what they wanted. *I-I’m sorry, everyone!* They all clearly disagreed with Kurtis’s claim that I was a knight, not the Great Saint—but I kinda thought of myself as a knight now too, so, y’know...

“Captain Kurtis is right,” I said. “I don’t have any saint powers now. The one who processed and created the new special healing potion was Saliera. She cured everyone. As for the one who thought up the ingredients and collected them, that would be Captain Kurtis.”

The townspeople looked at me as though they still had something to say. After a moment, though, they all lowered their heads.

“Very well,” said the chief at last.

Phew! They all accept that I’m a knight and not a saint now! I nodded to myself, satisfied, and looked up at Kurtis with some admiration. His words earlier had sounded a bit like a threat, but...surely he’d never threaten them. No, it must’ve been the trust the people of this land had in him that convinced them.

He’d spent all of this time fostering his bond with the people, and it had paid off. What a capable man.

As I calmed down, the chief muttered to himself. “I...see. So Miss Fia is ‘not’ Her Holiness.”

“That’s right, Grandfather,” said Ariel.

“Even so,” said the chief in a weak voice, looking up, “our incurable disease has been cured and our people have been saved.” A look of gratitude and reverence toward a higher power filled his eyes.

The townspeople fell silent, full of inexpressible gratitude. I stared at the chief. *Wh-what’s going on? I feel like we’re both on the same wavelength and also extremely not.*

Kurtis murmured to himself just behind me “I see...communication is more than just plain, obvious words. Communication is a network of all manner of things.”

The chief looked pleadingly to his grandson Ariel. “Am I unable to show Her Holiness my gratitude despite receiving such a blessing?”

“You may,” said Ariel, “if doing so is in accordance with what Miss Fia wishes.”

“I see.” The chief looked at me sorrowfully. I averted my eyes, only to notice the other townspeople were looking at me similarly. I squirmed in their gazes as the chief hugged his great-grandchild Myu. “Oh, Myu, my dear Myu. We’ve received yet more benevolence but remain unable to repay our debt. What are we to do?”

His heart-rending words echoed in the silence, and I thought to myself: *Wait, yeah... What are you to do?*

Chapter 30:

The Memorial Ceremony

IN THE END, Cyril was the one to break the silence. "From what I understand, chief, it sounds like many of these people have only just recovered from their sickness. Should we not return them to their homes and let them rest?"

The chief lifted his head in sudden realization, then quickly lowered it in gratitude. "It is as you say, Lord Sutherland. We townspeople will all do just that. Let us meet again in five days for the memorial ceremony." He hesitated briefly before turning to me. "Miss Fia, would you be so willing as to wear that light-blue dress to the memorial ceremony? It...suits you."

"Huh? I'd, uh, love to, but I'm here as a knight, so..." Hesitant to outright refuse, I looked to Cyril for help.

"This is the first time I've heard the chief make a personal request," said Cyril. "If you don't mind, Fia, would you fulfill it?"

"Huh? If I have your permission, then, um...gladly."

The chief and the rest of the townspeople smiled happily. I smiled back as well. *Huh. Does me wearing a dress make you all that happy? You're all pretty easily pleased, huh?*

Unsurprisingly, Kurtis and I were summoned to Cyril's office the moment we returned to the mansion. Cyril tried to get Kurtis some medical aid at first, but Kurtis kept insisting he was fully healed, and so off to Cyril's office the two of us went.

He probably wanted to grill a whole lot of info out of us. Why were the townspeople so convinced I was the Great Saint? Why was Kurtis covered in blood? What was this about a special healing potion? I had no doubt that a barrage of questions awaited.

With as calm an expression I could muster, I repeated my mantra over and

over in my head: *Silence is golden, silence is golden*. Across from me sat Cyril, and beside me sat Kurtis.

I've learned a whole lot about Cyril since I joined the First Knight Brigade, so there was no doubt in my mind that the best option available to me here was *silence*. No matter what I said, there was a 100 percent guarantee that I'd get a lecture. Which meant that the *best* option would be silence. And sure, I'd get a lecture no matter what, but at least I wouldn't give him more ammo.

I avoided matching his gaze and looked at his mouth. He stared at me for a few moments, then rapped the table with his fingers. The sound made me look up reflexively, where I met his forlorn eyes.

"Do you not trust me, Fia?" he said sadly. "Am I someone you can't confide in with the truth?"

"O-of course not!" I said quickly. "I-It's just that, um, how do I put it...? The truth is bigger than just me."

If the fact I was a saint got out, the deaths certainly wouldn't stop with me. If the demon lord's right hand caught wind that I was reborn and came to kill me, Cyril and the other knights might try and protect me. That would only end in disaster. I had to avoid that fate as much as possible.

"Um, Captain," I said, "I have a bit of a secret, you see. And it's a secret that'd cause serious problems if I shared it. So I can't. Not now, anyway."

Kurtis knew my secret, but that wasn't because I *told* him. The people of this land seem to have mostly figured it out themselves, but I haven't said a single word to them about it either. Even Zavilia, that clever boy, had figured everything out himself. In other words, I hadn't *technically* shared my secret with a soul!

"If I shared my secret with you, it'd just cause you problems," I said, hemming and hawing. Cyril was truly a wonderful knight. I didn't want him to come under harm's way for my sake. He'd probably back off if I explained that to him, but how *could* I explain it without revealing my secret?

"Oh my," he said, wide-eyed. "To think you, of all people, would try to protect *me*," He chuckled lightly. "You know, I don't quite mind the sound of that."

I saw his smile and thought from the bottom of my heart, *You're too kind, Captain Cyril*. The fact that I might be trying to protect him meant nothing to him. He had a responsibility to know exactly what transpired as Sutherland's lord, and I had a responsibility to tell him.

And yet he still didn't press me to share my secrets. He'd even deflected his own question with a light joke.

What could I do to repay this kind man? I stared at him unblinkingly and thought it over.

He reached out then, from across the table, and lightly patted my head. "Thank you, Fia. I appreciate the sentiment, and I hope you know how proud I am as your Captain." He crossed his legs then and smiled. "Feel free to only share what you can, but won't you please tell me what happened?"

I made up my mind. For such a kind man, I would share everything that I could. "Yes, Captain! So! In the morning I slipped away from this mansion and rejoined the festival and discovered word had spread among the townspeople that I might be the Great Saint's reincarnation. Some kids came by, so I went around the shops with them. We ate sugared grilled fruits first, which were super yummy—oh, I should have gotten you some as a gift! Forgive me for being such a tactless subordinate. Anywho, the shopkeeper refused to take my money! Can you believe that? No matter how much I insisted too. I guess it's a good thing I *didn't* get you a gift, when you think about it, because they probably wouldn't take my money for that either, and I'm sure you wouldn't be thrilled about a gift I got for free. Anyway, next we went to this amber sweets shop—"

"Fia," Cyril interrupted with a smile. "Thank you for being so detailed and clear, but *please* feel free to be more concise."

I thought I'd show my sincerity by being as detailed as possible. Ah, well.

"All right, then. Now, where to start..." If I couldn't show my sincerity through perfect detail, then maybe being as concise as possible would work. I was considering what the most crucial points would be when Kurtis spoke up beside me.

"Lady Fi, should I explain in your stead? As a third party, I believe I could

summarize this fairly quickly.”

“O-oh, sure. Please do.”

Come to think of it, Kurtis was on board with hiding my sainthood, wasn't he? Plus, I could trust him to explain without slipping up. Honestly, I should have left everything to him in the first place. He was much better at explaining stuff.

Relieved, I reached for the glass on the table. I took a sip, and something sweet slid down my throat. *Ah, wonderful. That's Captain Cyril for you. Even the drinks he gives guests are of the highest caliber.* I let my weight sink into the sofa behind me and took another sip.

Kurtis checked that I was situated, gave a satisfied nod, and began to speak in a proud voice. “To cut to the point, the hundreds of thousands of people making up the former islander peoples are now under Lady Fi's control! In but a few days, word of Lady Fi has spread far, and now they are all her loyal adherents! It is no exaggeration to say that Sutherland is already in Lady Fi's hands!”

“Pffft?!” I spat out the juice I was drinking. “Wh-wh-what in the world are you saying, Captain Kurtis?! C-C-C-Captain Cyril, I'm so sorry! I'm supposed to be doing something to repay you for your kindness, and instead I'm spraying juice all over you...!”

I didn't want to believe it, but I'd colored Cyril's impeccable gray hair orange with juice. I quickly moved to wipe his head, but Kurtis snatched the towel out of my hands. “Allow me,” he said. “Your noble self need not touch the body of a man.”

“C-C-C-C-Captain Kurtis?! Y-you're making it sound like I was going to do something *weird*! People will misunderstand!”

“One would have to be perverse of heart to misunderstand someone as pure as you,” he said. “Do not worry. If such a pervert exists, I shall crush them like an insect.”

“No, the problem here is your *phrasing*! Be more careful how you word things, okay?”

As though he couldn't be bothered to argue with me, Kurtis wordlessly turned

to Cyril and crudely towel-dried his hair.

Through all this, Cyril just stared at Kurtis with disbelief. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. “Quentin’s disease has spread, and without direct contact... Just how infectious *is* this?”

After drying Cyril’s hair and sitting back down on the sofa, Kurtis continued his explanation. “It’s simple, really. The people of Sutherland are just believing what they want to believe. That is all. They were saved by Her Holiness three hundred years ago. Many lost their lives one after another to a disease no saint could cure. As their kind neared annihilation, Her Holiness came to Sutherland by her own will and saved everyone.”

“Oh?” Cyril didn’t seem to understand what his fellow captain was on about.

Kurtis paid him no mind. “For the past three hundred years, the people of Sutherland have had no greater wish than to repay Her Holiness for her benevolence. That is to say—”

“K-Kurtis, wait...” Cyril interrupted, raising his voice. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Kurtis frowned. “I’d rather you not interrupt me while I’m extolling Lady Serafina’s good deeds.”

Cyril ignored Kurtis’s comment and mumbled absentmindedly under his breath. “The Great Saint saved the people of Sutherland before? But I don’t recall any record of such an event...”

Kurtis shrugged indifferently. “It was an unofficial visit. Her Holiness neglected her official duties to come here, and so no official record was left behind.”

Cyril went silent, falling deep into thought.

Kurtis saw this as an opportunity to continue. “I’ve lived in Sutherland for three years and would like to believe I’ve come to understand the nature of its people.”

Of course, in truth he *was* one of the former islander people, since he was Canopus. He understood his people *quite* well. I stared up at him, wondering

what he would say.

He spoke as though merely conveying common sense. “The former islander peoples never forget a favor. They will try to repay it even if it takes generations. Perhaps you’re aware that children here are told stories of Her Holiness from youth? They’re taught that their very lives were made possible by Her Holiness and that they must one day repay the favor. Their kind, numbering in the hundreds of thousands after three hundred long years, are all her loyal soldiers. They would gladly lay down their lives for Her Holiness.” He looked at me then, as though trying to persuade me directly. “Please understand. For the former islander peoples, nothing would make them happier.”

Obviously, I wasn’t persuaded at all. “O-oh, really? I wonder about that. I mean, all that business happened three hundred years ago, right? Who would be willing to give their life up for someone that hadn’t healed anyone they know?”

His brow furrowed. “If Her Holiness was presented with a heavily wounded person,” he said thoughtfully, “do you think she could bear *not* to heal them?”

This felt like some kind of trap. Still, I had to answer. “P-probably not...?”

He nodded. “It is the same for the people of Sutherland. They cannot fail to repay Her Holiness’s favor—they could not bear it. If their inaction, perchance, led to Her Holiness coming to harm...they could never live it down. Their guilt would hound them to the grave, then on down through their descendants. There is no greater unhappiness for these people, Lady Fi.”

“W-well...”

Seeing me fumble for words, he smiled kindly and turned back to Cyril. “The people have waited three hundred years for an opportunity to repay Her Holiness. It is no surprise, then, that they would come to see Lady Fi as their hero returned to them, what with her hair the exact color as that of Her Holiness. And this would be a good time to mention—we’ve discovered that the disease that ran rampant three hundred years ago has resurfaced again in Sutherland.”

“What?!” Cyril exclaimed, alarmed.

Kurtis put a hand up to calm him. “It’s all right. Everyone has made a full recovery already. But because we were present when this land’s saint made the special healing potion that cured them, the townspeople are under the impression that Lady Fi herself was the one who made the potion. It’s what they want to believe.”

“I don’t understand. How can they come to such a wild conclusion?”

“Likely because Lady Fi lent a hand. She and the saint were alone in a preparation room when they made the special healing potion, leaving much to the imagination.”

“I see...” Cyril sounded unconvinced.

Kurtis pointed to the knight uniform he was wearing. “Look at this blood-stained uniform! I tailed Lady Fi after seeing her surrounded by an odd group of townspeople. But they spotted me, and I was immediately attacked! I later learned that they believed they were protecting Lady Fi—who they believe to be Her Holiness—from me. Is that not strange at all? These townspeople, as peaceful as they are, are willing to descend into violence for her.”

“Hmm...” Cyril seemed to still have some doubts.

“But this is convenient for our cause,” he continued. “We can use this to fix the broken relationship between the townspeople and the knights—and by extension, the townspeople and the duchy—as we originally planned.”

“Are you suggesting we make use of this nonsense?” Cyril gave a troubled, hesitant look.

Kurtis nodded firmly. “Precisely. From the very start, I’ve wondered if we should make use of such an opportunity. Although things are going more smoothly than we anticipated, it would be foolish to shy away from this chance. Furthermore, this is what the townspeople themselves want.”

Cyril seemed lost for a moment. He looked down at his hands. “Kurtis, you... may have agreed with my suggestion to use Fia as a catalyst to get Sutherland moving again, but I myself was never entirely sure that my decision was the right one. Could the frayed connection between the knights and the townspeople really be fixed so quickly? Was that thinking itself not flawed?

Shouldn't we aim to slowly mend our relationship over the next hundred, two hundred years through simple sincerity? Even now, certainty eludes me."

"It's very like you to worry," said Kurtis, "but I assure you it's unnecessary. It may seem as though we are taking advantage of the people's beliefs to deceive them, but you must understand that this is not the case. Regardless...the matter might already be out of our hands. We've been insisting that Lady Fi isn't Her Holiness for some time now, but nobody believes us. They have built up their blind faith, and it is too high to topple."

So, Kurtis was suggesting that not only was it impossible to change the situation but that they shouldn't change it even if they could.

After a few seconds of hesitation, Cyril met my eyes. "Fia," he said, worry heavy in his voice, "are you okay with this? Is this burden not too great?"

"Huh?"

"Forgive me if this comes off as rude," he said kindly, "but I'm worried this might be too much for you. Saints are worshipped by all. For that reason..." he said, and hesitated. "Every woman yearns to be a saint, but you are *not* one. Would it not be troubling for you to be called the Great Saint's reincarnation herself, even though you are not even a saint?"

O-oh, I see! I looked at Cyril with admiration, moved that he would show such concern for something I hadn't even thought about. *What a kind, thoughtful man. Although I don't think it's healthy to show each of your subordinates that much worry.*

Now I was feeling worried for *him*, kinda. "Uhhh...well, I do feel a little troubled, but it's not a huge problem. I'd almost forgotten, what with all that's been going on, but I *did* agree to help improve relations between the people, you, and the knights. Things are going well, so I might as well stick with it!" I smiled.

Cyril gave me an exasperated look and sighed. "You...really are too kind for your own good."

You're the kind one here, Captain Cyril, I thought.

I had free time around noon the next day, so I arranged a secret meeting with Kurtis. We hadn't been able to talk one-on-one since I learned he was Canopus, and I had plenty of questions. There was a lot we absolutely *had* to talk about, so we agreed to a secret meeting in the empty forest.

I set off early so as not to be late, but Kurtis was already waiting for me. I checked our surroundings just in case, but nobody else was around. People were avoiding the forest like the plague after the recent basilisk incident.

"Hey, Kurtis!" I called out as I ran over. "Sorry—kept you waiting, huh?"

He quickly ran over to meet me. "Please, there's no need to run for my sake! What if you trip and fall?!"

I glared at him, exasperated. "Oh, c'mon!" I grumbled. "I haven't tripped since I was seven. Even if I did trip, I'm a saint. I can heal that in a snap."

"Yes...yes, you are indeed capable of such things, my lady," he said, his voice shaking with emotion and...sorrow?

I tilted my head. "Kurtis?"

"It's nothing. But...you truly have become so capable." He stared at me and sighed heavily.

Ookay, somebody's being a little weirdo, huh?

Putting his oddness aside, I asked, "Er, you're without a doubt Canopus, right? You remember your previous life, just like me?"

"Indeed. Forgive me for not confirming such with you earlier. Just yesterday, I recalled that I served by your side as Canopus Blazej three hundred years ago."

"Uhh, for sure. Look, you're not my knight anymore, so there's no need to talk like that, got it? Anyway, it seems almost dying was what made you remember your past life too."

"It would appear so," he replied. "However, in my case I remembered bits and pieces of my past life in the form of dreams from the moment I met you. I was half awakened by the time I saw you in that cavern surrounded by the townspeople. I wasn't in full control of my body, though—only later did I wake fully."

“Oh? I-Is that right? You started remembering from the time you met me? How strange...”

“There’s nothing strange about it at all. I had no greater wish than to serve you once again. In fact, it would have been strange if I hadn’t awoken when I met you.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” I blinked a few times, confused.

Deeply emotional now, he continued, “Oh...to think you’ve turned fifteen with no one by your side, all by yourself. How wonderful. You’ve grown so independent.”

“Wh-what? Uh, it’s actually pretty normal to grow up without a knight assigned to you. Besides, it’s not like I was alone. I had my family.”

“Oh, that’s right. Your father, older brothers, and older sister were all knights, weren’t they? Surely they protected you in your youth.”

“S-sure. My sister did look after me quite a bit.” But, because I had no talent with the sword, my father and my two older brothers constantly gave me the cold shoulder. No point in bringing that up, though.

“Oh, how I wish I could go back in time and serve you from youth again...” he muttered, lost in memory. He—Canopus—probably felt like he’d failed to fulfill his duties when I died far away from him. Although that wasn’t his fault in the slightest. I had to lighten his burden somehow.

I looked up at the well-built, blue-haired knight before me. “Hey, Kurtis?” I said, as nonchalantly as I could. “Um, about my death in my last life...it was... kind of a tie? See, I sealed away the demon lord! I just also got done in at the same time. What I’m saying is, since it all happened so fast, it didn’t hurt at all. Understand?”

The fact he couldn’t be by my side as I died probably weighed on him. He must have spent countless nights wondering how I’d died. I wanted to ease his guilt if I could...even if it was with a lie.

“Kurtis?” I said after waiting a moment for his reply. Thinking his silence was strange, I peered at his face, only to be taken aback. “Huh? Wh-what’s wrong?!”

He didn't seem to hear me, simply standing with his back straight and his arms down by his side, fists clenched. Tears streamed down his face, but he didn't move an inch.

"Kurtis...?" What was I supposed to do?

Without a sound, he wept. I hadn't a clue what was going on, but I certainly hadn't ever seen him cry before, not even in my past life.

He covered his face with his hands, then looked up to the heavens above. Huge tears continued to slip through his fingers.

"U-um, is everything okay?" I asked, putting a hand on him.

"I...understand..." he said hoarsely through his hands. Tears dripped down his chin. "If that...is the story you wish...to go with..."

I tilted my head. *Wh-what's going on?* Perhaps talking about how I died reminded him of how sad he was to be without me in his previous life? But his reaction seemed a little too overblown for that.

I watched him cry in silence, not quite sure what to do. Eventually, he removed his hands from his face and, with tears still streaming down, dropped to a knee and lowered his head deeply.

"Forgive me for failing to protect you," he said in a strained, agonized voice. "From the depths of my heart, I am sorry. If you wish me to take my own life as recompense, I shall gladly do so. But if I may so be allowed, I wish to protect you *properly* in this life."

What could I say to that? What could *anyone* say to that?

I stared at Kurtis blankly, at a complete loss for words, as he looked up at me with a pained expression.

What is wrong with me? It hadn't even occurred to me that he was hurting so much. I'd underestimated his loyalty. The shame of not having been able to stand as my shield as I was killed must've haunted him more than I could've ever imagined. He blamed himself for my death, and I hadn't even considered that until seeing his tears. Even though I'd always known how Kurtis—no,

Canopus—always suppressed his emotions for me.

I thought back to yesterday, when he'd explained the nature of the former islander peoples: *It is the same for the people of Sutherland. They cannot fail to repay Her Holiness's favor—they could not bear it. If their inaction, perchance, led to Her Holiness coming to harm...they could never live it down. Their guilt would hound them to the grave, then on down through their descendants. There is no greater unhappiness for these people, Lady Fi.* He had been talking about himself, about his own guilt. How did I miss something so obvious?

I crouched down and grabbed his hands. "I'm sorry, *Canopus*. I'm sorry for going off and dying on my own. I'm sorry for not realizing how much you suffered..." My words trailed off there as I fought to not cry along with him. I couldn't do that, not when I was the one who had to apologize. That wouldn't be fair at all.

That's what I wanted, at least, but my tear ducts had other ideas. A warm trail of tears slid down my cheek. They continued to stream down my face, even as I tried to stop them.

Seeing this, my blockhead of an ex-personal knight spoke. "Lady Fi...? Are you perhaps crying for my sake?"

Of course I am, you dummy! I cried for your sake yesterday too, don't you remember? Why had he thought I'd cried yesterday, huh?

Exasperated, I shot a fierce look at my ever slow-witted knight, but my tears continued to flow despite my best efforts. "I-Ignore these tears, okay?" I said quickly. "I'm just...um. I'm...shocked at how dull you can be."

"I understand, my lady. It was absurd of me to think you would shed tears for my sake."

"Wh-what? No! It's just that it's unfair of me to cry! I'm the one who's apologizing. It's like I'm leaving you no choice but to forgive me."

He tilted his head in puzzlement. Was it really so hard to understand? "Regardless of tears," he said, "I would never dream of denying you forgiveness—or anything else, for that matter. If anything, I am the one who should be seeking *your* forgiveness. You have nothing to apologize for..." He paused for a

moment. “Oh. I see. Perchance, were you admonishing me in a roundabout way for apologizing to you in tears myself?”

“Huh?! No, I just...I left you all alone and—” I tried to say something, but Kurtis cut me off—something he rarely ever did.

“Lady Fi, do not misunderstand. As your knight, the fault lies with me for having failed to stay by your side. Any regret or anguish I feel is mine alone.” He sounded calm, but I could practically feel the pain he was burying. I searched his face for some sign of his true feelings when he met my eyes and nodded.

“Three hundred years ago...after you died alone, I retrained myself. I swore to never fail again if I could somehow serve you once more. Sadly, this new body is weak, but I hope to build myself up in the coming months.”

He paused. Bit his lip as though biting back a new rush of pain. Narrowed his eyes. “Yesterday, in that cavern, I asked to be allowed to serve you once more without apologizing for my previous life’s failure. How selfish of me. I should have first sought your forgiveness. I apologize, Lady Fi, from the bottom of my heart. And I ask you, please, allow this shameful knight to protect you once more.” He bowed his head deeply in apology.

“Kurtis, you have nothing to apologize for,” I said, in the softest voice I could muster. “The past can’t be changed. There’s nothing to gain from wishing that pain away. If we believe the choices we make are right when we’re making them, then they were the right choices, regardless of what comes after.”

“But, Lady Fi, I—”

“Not once have I ever blamed or begrudged you for my death, Kurtis. Not as Serafina then, and not as Fia now.”

He paused for a long, grueling moment. “I...I understand.” Perhaps my words were starting to get through to him.

“Kurtis, you have been reborn,” I said slowly, letting each word hang in the air. “You have been given a new life. The same goes for me: I am no longer a princess. You have no reason to be bound to me any longer.” I didn’t look away for a single moment.

Canopus had been reborn as Kurtis, and he was given a new life to lead. As

Kurtis, he had no reason to retrace his life as Canopus. He could begin anew. But despite my words, he remained trapped by his previous life's duty. "To serve your benevolent self was my pride and joy. Would you deny me the opportunity to once again feel that pride? That joy?"

Faced with the serious look in his eyes, I swallowed. "K-Kurtis, this world is filled with so many fun things. I know you can be a little over the top with your sincerity sometimes, but it's okay to let yourself be free of your past."

I was saying this all for his sake, and yet he gave me a look not of gratitude but of concern. "If I may be so bold, might I ask why you hide your saint powers?"

"Wha-huh?" Why was he changing the subject?

"From what I have seen, you make use of your saint powers while also trying to hide them. In other words, you wish to be a saint but cannot openly declare who you are due to some unknown circumstance. Or perhaps you are hiding the fact you are a saint from somebody in particular."

H-he's sharp! Bah, why are all the knights around me so sharp?! Of course, similar things had happened enough by now that I kind of got that it was my own fault. I just kept letting my guard down because nobody mentioned anything till it was too late. Still, people were always watching.

"O-oh, I haven't told you yet, have I?" I stammered. "I actually have a familiar! Yep! And guess what? He's a black dragon, and one of the three strongest beasts on this continent! So, uh, I don't really need anyone else to protect me, you know?" There we go, Fia! Way to find a good excuse, even during a panic.

Yeah! I already have Zavilia, the strongest of all monsters, with me! He can take out blue dragons in the blink of an eye! I don't need anyone but him to protect me! Plus, Zavilia even said himself that he wanted to protect me!

I nodded proudly to myself as Kurtis surveyed our surroundings quizzically. "Where might this familiar be? I do not see any black dragons."

"Guh... H-he really exists, okay! I'm not lying! He just went off to become a king or something, and so he's away for a while. But we're still connected, so if something happens to me he can appear in a heartbeat!"

Kurtis scoffed lightly. “It sounds like your black dragon is still too green. Either that, or he doesn’t yet know the meaning of loss. It takes but a moment to lose what one holds dear.”

Something about his cynicism felt directed more at himself than Zavilia.

I was at my wit’s end. Nothing I said would convince Kurtis. So instead, I tried to change the topic.

“Okay, but you *do* realize you’re a knight captain and can’t leave Sutherland, right? And as for me, I’m just an ordinary knight! It’d be weird if you came back to serve me. I *am* hiding the fact that I’m a saint, sure, but don’t you see how that’d make me stand out more?”

Kurtis frowned as though in mental anguish. He stood stock-still for a few moments, staring at me with his teeth gritted. “In that case,” he said at last, “I shall join the First Knight Brigade as an ordinary knight, a vice-captain, or even a captain—whatever allows me to be by your side.”

“Wha-huh? U-um! Y-you...you *can’t*! You’re already the captain of the Thirteen Knight Brigade! Abandoning your post would make us *both* stand out!” I raised my voice, trying to get through his dense skull.

“Not necessarily. The First Knight Brigade are the guards of the royal family, and so are special. Everybody knows it is an honor to serve under His Majesty the King—it is often considered a promotion. Many strive to join the First Knight Brigade for that very privilege. After all, a kingdom values its king above all else.”

“Whaaat?” Come on, wasn’t that a bit of a stretch? I wasn’t all that familiar with hierarchy, brigade transfers, and whatnot, but I certainly knew Kurtis wasn’t the kind to care about that stuff. It’d be totally weird if he suddenly had a change of heart and wanted to be “promoted” to the First Knight Brigade. I mean, seriously! Wouldn’t a knight captain becoming an ordinary knight be a *demotion*?

I fell into deep contemplation. Kurtis smiled then and, still stuck in his overly optimistic mindset, asked, “Am I correct to think I’ll be allowed to serve at your

side again if I join the First Knight Brigade in a *natural* manner?”

“Huh? W-wait, I’m just an ordinary knight! There’s nothing natural about *anyone* serving me!” I said hurriedly, but Kurtis was off in his own world.

Oh no. This is bad. Kurtis and Canopus were mixing together in the worst possible way. He listened to my words kindly but forced his own opinion through like Kurtis while keeping an over-the-top adherence to his convictions like Canopus!

I heaved a big, dramatic sigh and gave Kurtis a sideways glance. “What’s *your* dream, Kurtis? What do you want to do? You haven’t been completely erased by Canopus, have you?”

“My foundations are still Kurtis, of course. But when I am before you, the parts of me that are Canopus are more prominent by the moment. As Kurtis...I wish to rekindle the bond between the knights and the people of this land that’s so dear to me. Actually, my fondness for these people and their acceptance of me might itself stem from my past life as one of them.” He smiled softly as he spoke, reminding me of the smiles he once made as Canopus.

I breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank goodness. He’s Canopus, but Captain Kurtis hasn’t disappeared or anything.* With that made clear, everything else felt insignificant in comparison.

“All right,” I smiled and extended my hand. “I don’t know how you’re going to do it, but if you come to the First Knight Brigade, you’re fine to stay with me.”

Kurtis froze for a second, staring down at my hand with disbelief. He grabbed it with both of his own. “This time, I shall protect you from everything and everyone in this world. I solemnly swear it to you.”

He sounded so sincere that I couldn’t make a joke like I planned to.

“Sure,” I said.

After parting from Kurtis, I spent the afternoon helping with the festival cleanup. I was joined by Fabian, who continued to surprise me with how

efficiently he worked. We already had powerhouses like Fabian and Cyril in the First Knight Brigade—if Kurtis joined, we'd be practically unbeatable!

Come to think of it, I faintly recalled we were going to have an inter-brigade mock battle kinda thing coming up soon. Or was it an inter-brigade contest put on for the King's entertainment? I couldn't remember which it was or even what kind of prize was on the line.

I was racking my brain, trying my best to remember, when Fabian called out to me. "Your Holiness Fia, you're making quite the greedy face. Should the Great Saint be so worldly?"

"Wha-huh?"

"Oh dear." He gave me a disapproving, exaggerated frown. "Your Holiness, such a reply lacks grace and is unbefitting of you."

"Oh, please!" I snapped. "The Great Saint probably says 'wha-huh' all the time."

"*That's* the part you take issue with?" He beamed. "You never fail to make me smile, Fia."

"Don't you think you're being a little rude? You're talking to the one who *might* be the Great Saint's reincarnation!" I gave him a stern glare, pretending to be cross.

"Yes, that...wow. Who would've thought that in just four days, these people would be worshipping you as the Great Saint. If I went back in time and told myself that five days ago, I wouldn't believe it, not in a million years." He sounded genuinely impressed.

I sharpened my glare on him, still pretending to be cross, and allowed a wave of relief to wash over me. Fabian and the other knights had, of course, heard the rumors flying around, but it seemed like none of them believed it all. In fact, the majority of the knights were convinced this was all some gambit of Cyril's to better the relations between the knights and the townspeople. The knights even went as far as to praise Cyril for his supposed ingenuity.

Cyril is brilliant and all, so it makes sense he'd get the credit.

Feeling like I understood the world a little better now, I decided to make my rounds and affirm what the other knights already believed. The last few knights I'd talked to had some theories about Cyril that were... Let's just call them *overblown*. Especially the ones that called Captain Cyril "a great sage" or "Captain Cyril the prophet." But there's no putting the genie back in the bottle, I guess.

Preparation for the memorial ceremony started the following day and would continue for two more days. To my surprise, the townspeople offered to help, calling to us out of the blue as my fellow knights traded jokes and worked. I turned around to find Ariel and about a dozen other townspeople all standing there skittishly. The knights seemed just as surprised as I was.

We had a long, awkward stare-down. Both sides were tense. Some passerby would probably think a fight was about to break out if they saw us—the thought of that made me burst into a fit of laughter.

Ariel gave me a reproachful look. "H-how awful, Your Holiness! How could you laugh at us?"

"I'm sorry, Ariel. I just thought somebody might see us and think we were gonna fight. Wouldn't that be hilarious?"

"Who'd think such a thing?!" he snapped back. "It's plain to see we're much weaker! Why would we pick a fight that we would so obviously lose?!"

"Dunno. Oh, but your help with the preparation would be appreciated! We're having some problems setting up this thing. Is there anyone who might be familiar with this kind of stuff among you all?" I asked, trying to bring our two groups together. We knights were an amicable bunch, and the former islander peoples were a warmhearted group, so I was sure we would get along swell.

It seemed my thinking was right: More and more townspeople appeared to help as time passed. By the last day of preparation, there were more townspeople than knights. It made you wonder who was really helping who.

Happily, I looked up at Kurtis—he was working beside me. "Isn't this great?! The knights and the townspeople get along well enough to work together now!

Thank goodness they met us halfway.”

He looked thoroughly unsurprised. “It’s only natural. *You’re* a knight, after all, so of course they’d warm up to your comrades.”

“Huh? No, no, you don’t get it, Kurtis! Jeez, why do you always base your thinking around me? This world’s a complicated mix of many, many things! I’m just one small cog in a big ol’ machine.”

“Heh.”

“Wha—did you just laugh at me?! *I’m* the one who should be laughing here! I was being kind when I *didn’t* laugh at how silly you were being, putting me on a pedestal and all!”

Despite our little quarrel, I was happy. I could clearly see he wasn’t *just* Canopus inside but a mix of Kurtis and Canopus.

The mood was light as we continued to prepare for the memorial ceremony. Before long, we’d finished our work without a hitch.

Like we had just before the festival, we ate a light dinner and went to bed early the night before the ceremony. It would begin before dawn, just as the festival had. Still, I had to wonder why all Sutherland events started so early. Maybe the people here were just really early risers? Hmm...

I thought back to my conversation with Kurtis the other day, when he cried and talked about how he felt when I’d died as the Great Saint. Was it my past life’s brothers that caused that strange reaction? The three of them would’ve returned to the castle safely and spread their own accounts of what happened. They probably said something along the lines of me being too weak to save. Maybe they even said I was too injured to be brought back. Point being, they probably said I was alive when they left me, just at death’s door.

Then again, I suppose it didn’t really matter *what* they said. Knowing Canopus, he’d imagine the worst and dwell on it no matter what. I heard he lived a long life after I died, probably spending his years imagining what horrible things might have happened to me until they felt real to him. Yeah...it had been a good idea to tell him I’d died peacefully.

I nodded to myself, glad that I could give Kurtis some solace. There were a lot of things I turned over in my head that night, but at some point I blinked, and bam—it was the next day. Marveling at how time flies when you go to bed, I got up and started to change.

As I promised Chief Radek, I put on my light-blue dress. I went to the dining hall for breakfast and was met with strange looks from my fellow knights.

“Fia, you do know today’s the memorial ceremony, right? It’s not a free day. Go put your uniform on.”

“Oh, I know. But Chief Radek made a personal request that I wear this dress.”

“That right?”

Even after I explained, the knights continued to give me strange looks, so much so that even I began to think it strange.

Wait, why’d Chief Radek want me to wear this dress in the first place? Am I just really cute in it?

I was confused, but it was time to go. We all went to where the ceremony was taking place—the cliff that Cyril’s mother had fallen from. It was total darkness outside, just before dawn, but there were already a number of knights with torches positioned along the cliff to give us some light.

At most ceremonies, the most esteemed participant—in this case, the Duke of Sutherland—would be summoned by another after everyone was gathered, but Cyril was already present. I couldn’t help but smile upon seeing him...it was just so thoroughly *Cyril* to forgo formality like this. If only his sincerity could reach the townspeople.

I gazed at him, thinking. It was dark out, with only the meager light of the torches to work with, but he stood tall, easily distinguishable and drawing everyone’s eyes. He and the other knights wore their ceremonial uniforms, and I’d say they looked quite good. The features on Cyril’s torch-lit face were even more prominent than usual in the darkness. I tilted my head and thought to myself, *Wow, he’s handsome. How’s a knight captain like him still single?*

Perhaps, I continued to ponder, it was his obligations as duke that tied him down and prevented him from marrying freely. Or did he have some flaw that

far overshadowed his good qualities?

I was still wondering and watching him when he noticed my arrival and beckoned. I ran over, thinking this might be something urgent, only for him to point to his side.

“Could you stand here for me?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Just in case. I’ve finally realized that I should be doing what I can to support your Great Saint act. You’ve been doing an admirable job, by the way.” He gave me a clear, guileless smile.

I shot him a dubious look. *Thanks, Captain, but I can manage without the help.* Then again, I still wasn’t quite sure why the townspeople were completely and utterly convinced I was the Great Saint, and why nothing seemed to shake them from that. Still, I didn’t need any further support.

Not that I could voice that opinion to my captain. Nope, I just nodded obediently.

The ceremony would begin while there was still total darkness outside. From what I’d heard at breakfast, it was just before dawn that was the most sacred time of day here, because it was the time of day that the Great Saint saved the people of Sutherland. And so the memorial ceremony started then, like all the other important events they held.

I tilted my head in wonder when I heard that tidbit from one of my fellow knights. *Huh. Was it around dawn when I cured the yellow-speckle fever here?* Truth be told, I’d been too worn out from riding through the night—or no, it had been two days straight—to even remember what time of day it had been. It was a shock to think the former islander people could so accurately pass down information that I myself couldn’t remember. If there was ever a Great Saint quiz contest, I’d probably lose to these people, even though I was the Great Saint herself. Ugh. lame.

As I idled time away thinking such thoughts, the time for the ceremony came.

“The memorial ceremony shall hereby begin!” The announcer knight boomed. All one hundred knights from the Royal Castle, the civil officials, and the many, many townspeople hung their heads in silent prayer.

The Lament of Sutherland took place only ten years ago. Many present were either family or acquaintances of those who lost their lives. I prayed as well, both for those who’d died and for the peace of those who lived on.

Next, as Duke of Sutherland and the second in line to the throne, Cyril stepped forward. To show he was here as a proxy for the royal family, he wore the royal family’s coat of arms on his chest—an insignia sporting the image of a black dragon. He strode forward, stopped before the stone monument memorializing the dead, and bowed his head deeply.

“I offer my deepest condolences to those who have lost their lives.” He spoke more slowly than usual, his voice carrying well and echoing deeply in the hearts of those present. He then placed holy water and the holy flower before the stone monument.

The ceremony continued, and each part was handled meticulously. Everything was going well, and all that remained was to call the ceremony to a close.

Then, suddenly, a roaring gust of wind nearly knocked a knight near the cliff from his feet. “Whoa?!”

The knights standing nearby reached out, but the staggering knight failed to grab hold and plummeted into the ocean with a loud splash.

“S-somebody fell! Quick, we need to save them!”

Shocked, I ran up to the edge of the cliff and looked down. The pitch-black water was too dark to see through by the moonlight alone, and I couldn’t make out the fallen knight amidst the waves.

“Dan!” one of the knights called. “Say something if you can hear us!”

A number of knights were searching the ocean now, just as I was, some shouting out into the darkness. I strained my eyes as hard as I could to search when I heard some unconcerned whispers from the townspeople behind me.

“Wouldn’t a knight know how to swim? The ocean’s deep here and the waves

are gentle today, so it's unlikely they're hurt. What's the fuss about?"

"They're probably worried their fancy knight clothes will get ruined by the sea water."

"Oh, I see."

I quickly spun around—of course, *there* was the help we needed! *The people of Sutherland have their webbed hands!* I thought. It sounded like they didn't see the ocean as a big deal either, so saving the fallen knight would be easy.

"Um, excuse me..." I began, but I never got to finish. Right after I had spun around, another strong rush of wind blew, ruining my already unsteady balance. "Huh? Whoa—" The nearby knights tried to catch me as soon as they realized I was falling, but it was too late. I reached out and grabbed only air. "Wh-whaaat?!"

I flapped my arms like a bird as I teetered on the edge, trying to somehow stop my fall, but my feet left the ground all the same. "A-and right when I was just about to ask for heeelp!"

For a few moments, everything was weightless. Then, with a loud splash, into the ocean I went.

Aw heck, but I suck at swimming! I thought as air bubbles floated up from under me. I stared up at the surface. *Okay, I better at least get up there and show my face.* But the moment I thought that, two consecutive *splashes* rang out, one after another.

"Huh?" Inadvertently, I opened my mouth, causing sea water to flow inside. *A-ack! It's salty! Sea water is so salty!*

I tried to cover my mouth with both hands but I couldn't—both of my arms had been grabbed. I felt my body rising to the surface.

"Pfft!" I spat out the salt water, even though I knew it was bad manners to do so. *Thank goodness it's dark out.* It was improper of a lady to spit, even if it was salt water. Despite the full moon, it was still too dark to see anything that wasn't right next to me.

I breathed a sigh of relief but soon realized I was being watched, very closely,

on both sides. “*Eeep!*”

I almost sunk backward from sheer surprise, but the two reached out and propped up my back.

“Are you all right, Fia? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Lady Fi! Oh, thank goodness you’re safe...”

On my left was Cyril, and on my right was Kurtis. Each of them held one of my arms. They’d both jumped in to save me, getting sopping wet in the process.

“Wh-what kind of knight captain jumps into an ocean to save an ordinary knight?!” I sputtered. “And...*oh no!* Both your expensive clothes are ruined! All that intricate, silver-threaded embroidery! And your aiguillettes are going to be soaked!” I was shouting so loud that it was even surprising *me!*

Knight captains led at the helm. It didn’t make sense for them to jump in and try to save their subordinates themselves. And even if they didn’t seem to care about that, they’d still ruined their ceremonial uniforms! These weren’t just normal, everyday-use uniforms, you know? No, the captains’ ceremonial uniforms were far more luxurious than any I might receive. Their collars and cuffs were intricately embroidered.

I looked at their uniforms and felt depressed. Totally ruined, all because of me.

Cyril looked at me with wide eyes while Kurtis just glared at me disapprovingly.

“You’re worried about...our clothes?” Cyril said, shocked. “Would you feel better if I told you I have a spare change prepared?”

“Lady Fi, you need not concern yourself over something as petty as clothing,” said Kurtis. I could hear the worry in his words. “Or are you perhaps having monetary troubles?”

Hearing Kurtis’s words, Cyril looked at me with surprise. “Come to think of it, Quentin tried to give you his full pay on payday once, didn’t he? Oh dear. Fia, you wouldn’t happen to be destitute, would you?”

And here we go again... Every now and then, the Law of Multiple Captains

Equals Chaos comes into play. It's a fundamental law of nature I'd discovered. Captains act like proper captains individually, but they start acting weirder whenever they gather together, or so I'd observed as of late. Quite the ingenious discovery, if I did say so myself. Let's call it the Law of Chaotic Captains for short, shall we?

Rather than ponder natural laws, however, I guess I should've been figuring out a way to escape these two now-chaotic captains. But just then, the escape route I was plotting was obstructed by even more falling people.

"Captain Cyril! Are you all right?"

"Captain Kurtis! Which one are you?"

"Fia! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Knight after knight appeared, each blurting out the first thing on their minds.

"Your Holiness! Oh, Your Holiness!"

"Your Holiness, are you all right?!"

A number of panicked townspeople had landed in the water as well.

What should I do? This is only getting more chaotic!

"I found you! Oh, Dan, it's just you. Where the heck is Fia?"

Hey! How'd you mistake me for that burly-looking guy?! Wait, isn't Dan the knight we were looking for in the first place? Uh. At least he's safe, right?

I let out a sigh of relief...but before I knew it, I was surrounded by even more people. I could hear still more *splashes* as still more jumped into the ocean.

Sizing up the situation, Kurtis looked up and shouted out: "This is Kurtis, Captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade! Lady Fi and Captain Cyril have been secured and are safe! To prevent accidents, I hereby prohibit further jumping!" He then looked around and yelled, "Everyone, get to shore, now!"

Hearing this, the crowd of townspeople at the edge of the cliff spun around and broke into a run. "Towels! Get towels ready!" One yelled. They were probably running to shore to meet us.

While I had my attention on the cliff above, Cyril—still holding my arm—

asked, “Can you swim, Fia?”

Heh heh heh. I’m glad you asked, Captain Cyril!

“Yes!” I boasted. “Once I get my head above water, I can manage alone! I can even swim *without* putting my face underwater!”

Cyril smiled meekly. “Oh. I, uh. Great.”

Sensing his doubt, I realized I had no choice but to show off my signature Fia swimming style. “Yep, so you can let my arm go now. You too, Kurtis.”

With some hesitation, the two of them let go of my arms. I bent my back over while still keeping my face above water and paddled my feet. Oh, but it was far, far more intricate than *that*. I also bent my elbows and paddled my hands below my chest and *voilà!* I was swimming forward...and all without getting my face wet!

“What do you think? Pretty cool, right?! You know how your mouth gets all salty when you stop to breathe after putting your face underwater? Well, this technique gets past that by allowing you to swim *without* putting your face underwater! Brilliant, right? The idea came to me fully formed after I saw some animals swimming!” I proudly explained.

Cyril gave me this odd look, like I was a kid or something. “Ah. I see. Well done, creating a swimming style of your own. But the physiology of man and beast are a little different. I cannot help but wonder if there might be a more suitable swimming style for you.” He gave me a conflicted look. “Fia, your swimming style is so wonderfully *unique*, but there is room to improve speed-wise. Would you like to hold on to my back? Everybody is worried for you and would love nothing more than to see you quickly return to shore safe and sound.”

I looked around and saw many of the townspeople who had jumped into the ocean were loitering around us with worried looks, despite Kurtis’s orders. *Oh dear. Well, I don’t want to make them worry*, I thought and gripped Cyril’s shoulders. “I think I’ll take you up on that offer, Captain.”

“Hold on tight so you don’t fall off,” he said with a backward glance. He started off slowly, but once he confirmed I had a grip, he started to swim faster.

“Whoa, that’s some speed. It’s like I’m riding a boat!” I said enthusiastically. His shoulders were fairly broad despite his lean figure, and he had all the right muscles, giving his body a firm sense of stability. *Thank you, Boat Captain...*

“I’m like a boat, you say? I’ve never heard *that* one before. Thank you for letting me experience something new, Fia,” Cyril said, amused.

Cyril let me down once we reached a sand bar shallow enough to stand on. Not realizing how soft the sand would be, I staggered slightly. He immediately caught my arm and supported me the rest of the way. Kurtis was a few meters behind, staying close as if he were my bodyguard.

We walked through the water until we reached a sandy beach packed tightly with waiting townspeople. I smiled, thinking that these people were terribly kind to show so much worry toward me and the other fallen knights, and so I sped up my walk. The sky began to brighten with soft light then, as dawn finally arrived. The brilliant rays of the morning sun spilled out over the dark ocean.

“Daybreak’s here and only just a bit late,” I said to Cyril as the dark ocean began to take on color. “It sure wouldn’t have hurt to have the light a bit earlier.” If the sun had been out, we would’ve been able to find the fallen knight easily. Certainly, we wouldn’t have needed over one hundred people to plunge into the ocean.

Thinking such thoughts, I continued to walk toward the beach. We were close to shore now, the water level already reaching below my knees. I could make out the faces of the townspeople from where I was, so I smiled and waved with my free hand. To my surprise however, the townspeople all looked back at me with expressions of shock. “Huh...?”

Was it weird for me to smile and wave here? Now that I thought about it, I’d really caused a ton of needless trouble by falling into the ocean while trying to help that other knight. It was my fault that so many other people had jumped in...and now the ceremony was ruined. And here I was, smiling without a care in the world. How shameless.

I tried to make myself look serious and peeked at the townspeople’s faces. One by one, those I made eye contact with fell to the ground as though struck

by lightning.

“Huh? Wh-what’s wrong?!” I quickly let go of Cyril’s arm and ran for the beach. Even more people fell as though struck by lightning, this time in droves. Now nobody was left standing. “Wha-huh?!” As I approached, confused, I saw that they were all kneeling in prayer.

“Oh...Your Holiness...!”

“She’s just as brilliant as in legend...”

I heard intermittent voices here and there, but I couldn’t fully make out or understand what anyone was saying. It wouldn’t be until later, after Kurtis explained, that everything would click. Apparently, I looked a lot like how the Great Saint did three hundred years ago when she saved the people of Sutherland from the yellow-speckle fever.

Her Holiness smiled, clad in a light-blue dress and with long fluttering red hair. The first rays of dawn illuminated her hair from behind, the dawn’s red glow and the red of her hair intermingling, indistinguishable from one another.

Such was the spectacle that the people of Sutherland had witnessed and passed down through legend, or so Kurtis later explained. In the moment, however, I had no idea why the townspeople were reacting like that. I just tilted my head in wonder.

A single man among them stood up. “Everyone! Burn this sight into your eyes! Remember Her Holiness’s color!” Looking carefully, I could see it was Chief Radek speaking. “The light of dawn blending with red hair, the light-blue dress—everything is just as passed down in legend! This is the Great Saint of the Dawn!”

“Wha—hey?!” I exclaimed. I was about to stop the chief when Kurtis appeared by side and bowed, asking me to just...let it go.

“Lady Fi, perhaps we should allow the townspeople to do as they like here.”

“R-really? Kurtis? Isn’t this...”

Before I could say that this was all a bit much, Kurtis drew close and whispered into my ear. “These people have longed for Her Holiness Serafina’s

return for three hundred years, their feelings piling higher and higher and their faith growing ever stronger. If you stop them here, it will *only get worse*.”

“K-Kurtis, I understand you’d want to help the former islanders, b-but...is that some kind of threat?!”

He gave me a puzzled look. “Me? Threaten you? Why, not in a million years.”

Gah, this darn airhead! I thought bitterly. Saying something that scary couldn’t be anything *but* a threat!

I was about to complain further when I heard a voice belonging to someone that *couldn’t possibly* be there, and I stiffened with a jolt.

“I thought it was strange enough that you were all having a nighttime swim, but this is stranger still. Fia, why are all these people worshipping you?”

“Huh?!” There it was, that familiar and dignified voice of a true leader, but...no, he couldn’t possibly be here. I blinked a few times, confused. Full of trepidation, I turned around. And there he was.

The Commander of the Black Dragon Knights bathed in the resplendent rays of the morning sun. He sat atop a pitch-black horse, and his black mantle fluttered in the wind, dark as the eyepatch over his eye. His figure was imposing, his bearing had the dignity of one who had stood at the vanguard of armored legions. The townspeople didn’t seem to know who he was, but they recoiled from his intimidating air.

“C-Commander Saviz?” I stammered, hesitating. “I-Is that really you?” Could this really be him? Was this really Saviz or just some lookalike?

Amused, he smiled and slowly rode his horse forward. “Who’s to say? Perhaps you’d like to check for yourself?”

I frowned. *What the heck is the Commander saying?* Maybe he was feeling giddy from having gotten away from the Royal Capital, but this was a little much. Still, I couldn’t very well say ‘no thank you’ to the highest-ranking man in the Knight Brigade.

I ran up to him, my feet splashing as I left the ocean. He stopped his horse a few steps from me and hopped off.

He raised an eyebrow—I was sopping wet from head-to-toe. “You went for a night swim in a dress? What were you thinking? Did my two proud knight captains not think to stop you?”

I glanced back at Cyril and Kurtis, both standing at attention behind me, as Saviz unbuttoned his mantle and took it off in one fluid motion. I was so lost in admiration of how even the simplest of his actions were perfectly graceful that I didn’t realize he was putting the mantle on *me* until it was over my head.

“Hwuh?” I was left dazed, my vision suddenly the red color of the mantle’s inner lining. He wrapped the mantle around my body once before letting go.



“You’ll catch a cold like that,” he said, and his lips curved into an amused smile. “Go change your clothes...Your Holiness.”

“Huh...? Wh-what?!”

After hearing his words, I slowly began to piece together why Saviz was here.

But...but I was planning on the rumors of me being the Great Saint’s reincarnation to only last while I was in Sutherland and peter out once I left!

From the look of things, though, the fact that I was thought to be the Great Saint had somehow reached Saviz’s ears. Hmm...I guess that *was* a pretty big deal, huh? I should’ve known that word would reach the upper echelons. And because Saviz was the type to confirm things firsthand, he must’ve come by horseback as soon as he received the report. It was still early dawn, so he had to have ridden all night. Jeez...I felt bad for all those knights assigned to him that had to put up with something so grueling! Of course, the one who deserved the most sympathy right now was *me*. The only way out of this pickle was a swift retreat...

I made a meek face and bowed to Saviz. “It is as you say, Commander. It would be rude of me to catch a cold and cause everyone trouble. I shall do as you suggest and go change my clothes.” Before Cyril and Kurtis could hope to stop me, I darted off...or I tried to, but the townspeople stopped me.

“Your Holiness, Your Holiness! Please, use this towel!”

“Your Holiness, are you unharmed?”

“Your Holiness, I brought you something warm to drink!”

In moments, the townspeople had gone from praying on their knees to leaping up and surrounding me, as if they sensed my desire to flee.

“Huh? Uh, well...I-I have this mantle now, but thank you...” Oh, right, I had to deal with *that* now too. What was I supposed to even do with Saviz’s mantle? Wash it and return it? What if I screwed up and tore the fabric? Ugh...as much as I appreciated his kindness, this was all pretty inconvenient.

As I thought to myself, dawdling, I heard footsteps in the sand behind me—it was Saviz.

Ack! Now I was stuck between the townspeople and him. *Oh crap, oh crap. I have to escape, double time!* I thought, searching my surroundings for an escape route...but there was Captain Cyril blocking my left and Captain Kurtis on my right!

Surrounded by enemies on all sides! Somebody, anybody, tell me how to get out of this predicament!

Despite my quiet cries for help, nobody came. I was enclosed on all sides. Left with no other choice, I braced myself. *Did they figure out I was trying to run away? What do I do...?*

My mind raced, trying to figure a way out of my predicament, when I remembered something important.

“C-Captain Cyril! I almost forgot, but...is the memorial ceremony over yet? I don’t recall any official declaration it was over...” There was a chance the ceremony had been halted because I fell in the ocean. I looked at Cyril, eyes full of worry.

He gave a slight nod. “You raise a good point. All that was left was to call the ceremony to a close, but with me—the one presiding over the ceremony—leaving it to jump into the ocean, it remains incomplete. We can’t leave such an important event unfinished, so I shall return to call it to a close.”

“Really?! Th-then allow me to join you!” I said in a rush. As his loyal direct subordinate, it only made sense that I tagged along! Naturally, I was only acting out of a pure sense of duty and wasn’t trying to escape my current situation at all—perish the thought. There was no justifiable reason whatsoever for Saviz and Kurtis to be staring daggers at me like they were right now.

With some pep in my step, I started to return with Cyril to where the ceremony was taking place, but Chief Radek spoke up in a hesitant voice. “Um... Your Holiness, Your Grace, if you wouldn’t mind, perhaps we could continue the ceremony?”

Cyril turned and gave the man an inquiring look.

Voice tense, the chief continued. “We former islander peoples have a unique

mourning tradition passed down since long ago. It's nothing grand, but every year after the memorial ceremony we gather to pour drinks for one another, sing ancient songs, dance, and pay respects to those who have passed."

"What a fine way to honor their memory," Cyril said approvingly.

The chief relaxed. "If you would be so inclined, we'd be honored to have Your Grace and the other knights join us this year. The end of the memorial ceremony can wait until the end of our mourning service."

"I see..." Cyril fell silent, the meaning of the chief's offer not lost on him. It was a rare sight to see the ever-eloquent Cyril struggle for the right words, but I couldn't blame him. The chief's offer was a clear, unequivocal attempt to make peace. There was no other way to interpret lumping together the kingdom's memorial ceremony and the former islander peoples' mourning service.

I balled my hands up tight and looked at Chief Radek. *Chief, you're amazing.* In all likelihood, not all the townspeople were on board with the idea, but he was choosing to take the plunge and reconcile with the knights as the representative of his people.

I smiled, overjoyed...and that's when I noticed the tense look on the chief's face. He was probably worried that his offer wouldn't be accepted...both the townspeople and the knights held conflicting opinions toward reconciliation, after all.

The man was waiting, fists clenched, when suddenly Cyril broke into a broad, beautiful smile as though elated from the very depths of his heart. "Chief Radek, thank you kindly for the offer. It would be our honor to join you."

The chief's joy was plain to see.

Huh... I figured a Duke would have to approach this more carefully. Apparently, I wasn't alone in thinking that. Voices of astonishment rang out from the townspeople, all shocked by how straightforward his response was. Still, I was sure that Cyril's blunt eagerness was the right way to handle it. Showing such joy at the chief's offer would, in turn, let the townspeople feel pride in their tradition.

Everyone...do you understand this man's kindness and sincerity now?! After

ten long years, Cyril had finally started getting through to the townspeople. Looking at the smile on his face, I couldn't help but smile too.

The smile spread to the chief. He gave Cyril a nod and turned to me. "Miss Fia, by all means, please attend as well."

"Thank you, I will!" I replied, beaming.

Next, the chief looked to Saviz. Saviz's presence surely weighed on his mind, and he probably wasn't sure whether it would be rude to address Saviz—or conversely, if it would be rude *not* to address him. While he didn't know who this stranger was for certain, he could surely tell that Saviz was somebody of high importance.

Well spotted, Chief! Saviz was, indeed, a VIP among VIPs. He was the Commander of the Náv Black Dragon Knights, the Náv Kingdom being one of the two dominant powers on the continent.

Without his mantle, Saviz looked indistinguishable from the other knight captains, but the aura he exuded was distinct. His very presence made one hold their breath, and his slightest movement captivated all gazes.

Nobody said a word, but Saviz sensed the mood of the townspeople and stepped forward to name himself. "I am Saviz Náv of the Náv Black Dragon Knights. I am pleased to see that the memorial ceremony is yet unfinished so that I may attend."

His words were concise, but his tone, gaze, and bearing conveyed all that needed to be said. His voice was powerful, and his figure clad in its white knight uniform was stately—it left no room for doubt that he stood at the apex of the Knight Brigades.

Unsurprisingly, the townspeople understood. This man was the commander of the Knight Brigades, the younger brother of the king. And this man, for all his importance, had taken time out of his busy schedule to come to Sutherland's memorial ceremony.

The chief leaped back and uttered a loud gasp upon hearing Saviz's name.

"Whoa!" I've never seen someone literally, physically jump from sheer surprise.

Those around the chief seemed just as shocked, their postures stiff as they crept back, muttering among themselves in frightened voices.

“S-Saviz? Like, the commander of the Black Dragon Knights...?”

“I-I hear he can defeat any monster all by himself...”

“W-well, I heard he once decimated every single knight captain alone...”

I nodded to myself. *I get it, I really do.* I’d heard all kinds of rumors too—he’d defeated an A-rank monster all by himself, for instance, or he’d even cut down over a thousand enemy soldiers. Whenever I stood before him, I couldn’t help but think those rumors must be true.

The chief regained his senses and dropped to the ground on a knee. A bit emotional, he said, “W-we are deeply honored by your visit, Your Highness.”

Yeah, I guess Saviz’s very presence is awe-inspiring stuff. Can’t disagree. As though in agreement with my thoughts, those behind the chief began to kneel as well.

In the end, Saviz and the other knights were to join the former islander peoples’ mourning service as the chief requested. That said, the majority of the knights and townspeople were sopping wet, so it was agreed that we would all change our clothes first and then reconvene. The townspeople were concerned that Saviz might want to change out of his traveling clothes, but I honestly couldn’t see any difference between what he wore now and what he wore at the Royal Castle. What’s more, he didn’t seem tired in the slightest.

How odd. It should’ve taken days to travel here, but he showed no sign of fatigue. Typically, the position of knight commander was an honorary position determined by lineage, but...well, not only did his lineage happen to be impressive, but he *himself* was impressive in strength and toughness. He was a man worth serving.

With that last happy thought in mind, I returned to the mansion to change with the other knights that had plunged into the ocean.

“Whoa, I look so cute!” I couldn’t help but squeal upon seeing how I looked in

the mirror. The townspeople had lent me an orange one-piece dress after my last dress got soaked, and it was just so *fancy*! It had these large frills that looked like fish fins—maybe modeled after the townspeople’s own webbed hands, now that I thought about it. What a carefully considered dress...the idea of them going through so much thought for something they were lending me was wonderful!

I was all smiles, but I still had to wonder...was it okay for me to wear this dress while all the other knights wore their knight uniforms? I didn’t want to stand out if I could avoid it. Then again, the other knights that had fallen into the ocean were also given changes of clothes by the townspeople, so it was probably fine. I allowed myself a sigh of relief.

Now that I was changed, there wasn’t really anything else to do. I wondered for a moment how I could pass the time, eventually deciding I might as well lend the townspeople a helping hand. With all the new participants, the townspeople had to change the location of their planned mourning service to the mansion’s courtyard, so there was probably a ton of work to be done.

Cyril and Kurtis were off in a room with Saviz, discussing how to handle the latter’s sudden arrival. Cyril and Kurtis chose to remain in their sopping-wet formal clothes for the conversation, earning an exasperated look from Saviz.

Ho ho ho! Must be tough being one of the elite! I’m so lucky to be an ordinary knight, I thought as I trotted out into the courtyard.

“Your Holiness! Are you feeling okay? Are you unhurt?”

“My, Your Holiness! You look wonderful in our dress!”

“Oh, to think the day would come when Her Holiness would wear the clothes we made! Your Holiness, your beauty is divine!”

The townspeople called out to me the moment they saw me. I smiled back at them. “Thank you for inviting us all to your mourning service! I’m really happy to take part!”

“My, such kind words! Unfortunately, we aren’t finished preparing yet...”

“That’s okay, I was hoping I could help out.”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean, ‘huh?’” I was surprised by *their* surprise. We all looked at one another, confused. The moment passed then, and we all broke into smiles. “Why are you so surprised?” I asked with a laugh. “Do I seem the unhelpful type? You guys helped us prepare for our country’s memorial ceremony, so it’s only fair I help out for yours. We have to help one another where we can, y’know?”

“Yes, indeed. My, you speak just as you did in the legends!” They nodded back at me eagerly. “Indeed, Your Holiness, let us help one another!”

I tilted my head in wonder. *Huh? They wouldn’t happen to have a record of what I said three hundred years ago, would they? Who would even remember such a thing? Oh, crap. At this rate, I wouldn’t even qualify to give that hypothetical Great Saint quiz contest a try in the first place! And I’m her!*

“Your Holiness?” one of the townspeople had noticed I was off in my own little world.

“Oh, I’m okay,” I replied.

With their help, I got to work on the preparations. First, we spread out beautiful cloth tapestry all over the soft grass of the courtyard and lined vibrant round cushions on top. Then we tied long, narrow strips of richly colored cloth here and there on various branches. According to the townspeople, the strips of cloth fluttered when the departed souls returned.

Around the time we finished, Saviz, Cyril, and Kurtis arrived. Cyril and Kurtis had changed out of their sopping-wet formal clothes and into the clothes that the townspeople had lent them—which were a bit uncharacteristically flashy, I must say. They had on white shirts, a loose-fitting, dark-colored jacket with cute patterns dressing the hems, and a wide blue cloth wrapped around their hips. It didn’t seem like something either of them would wear, if they had a choice, but they wore what they were given nonetheless. Oh, how kind they were! They could’ve easily used their positions as an excuse to wear their knight uniforms instead...actually, why *didn’t* they?

I gazed at them, in outfits a far cry from their usual look, and you know what? They still looked pretty striking! Sure, they lacked that serious, well-put-

together air they usually projected, but their natural good looks shone through. Honestly, those looks would probably carry anything they wore.

As mean as it sounded, I was secretly looking forward to seeing them look a little dorky... Uhh, was that petty?

Shortly thereafter, we began.

The chief requested that Saviz give the opening address, but Saviz insisted the souls resting in Sutherland would rather hear one of their own.

The chief relented and gave the opening address himself. The townspeople nodded as they listened to his warm, heartfelt opening words. As always, I found myself impressed with Saviz's judgment. The townspeople likely would've been fine with him giving the opening address, but humbly taking a step back and letting the chief do it himself earned more respect.

That's the commander for you, yep, yep, I thought as I looked at him from a short distance away. Indeed, Saviz was actually sitting fairly close to me—much to my dismay, I was sitting in one of the places of honor. With me were Saviz, Cyril, Kurtis, Chief Radek, and a number of other important people. For whatever reason, I was considered one of those important people.

Yeah, I knew that the people of Sutherland believed me to be the Great Saint's reincarnation, but they couldn't just group me with the knight commander, knight captains, and the village chief like this. I stood out like a sore thumb!

I withheld my complaints, though. Instead, I tried to at least sit in the lowest spot of seniority among the seats of honor. As someone who had sworn to Cyril to help repair the knights and the Sutherland Duchy's reputations among the townspeople, I couldn't very well complain about this arrangement. Sure, I didn't expect any of this frankly uncomfortable worship of me that was going on, but I kind of brought it all upon myself. Gotta be more careful next time, I guess, and think twice before agreeing to anything...

As I reflected upon my actions, drinks and food were served. The appetizing dishes lined up on that rustic table...and it all looked scrumptious! *Sutherland's*

right next to an ocean, so it makes sense there'd be so many fresh seafood dishes.

I called out to Saviz. “Commander Saviz, is there anything you’d like to eat? Anything I should avoid?” The food was all set up on big platters for people to take from, so I figured I’d go fetch food for him.

“I’ll be fine with anything you bring me,” he replied. I couldn’t tell if he was fully serious or just joking.

I glanced his way, saw his amused grin, and thought, *Dang, these executive types are hard to read.* He was clearly enjoying himself, but there was definitely more going on under the surface. What was he plotting, anyway? The fact that he took the time out of his schedule to come to Sutherland in the first place was suspicious... But then again, I doubted whatever was happening would concern an ordinary knight like me, so I decided to just grab whatever food looked yummy for him.

After Saviz’s portion, I also grabbed Cyril’s and Kurtis’s portions. To my surprise, however, Kurtis had already done the same for me, handing me a plate full of all my favorite foods. He wasn’t my ex-personal knight for nothing—he knew *exactly* what was to my liking. (My taste in food hadn’t changed in this life, by the way.)

I started with an egg dish. “Mmm—*mmmh!* Delicious!” It was cooked to perfection, left just a teensy bit runny.

As I savored the food, I noticed the townspeople watching me with broad smiles. Anyone could move freely at this event, so they came by in turns to talk to me, much to my delight. Eventually, a familiar young girl came, holding hands with her mother—it was the girl Cyril had carried back on the return trip from the basilisk incident.

I called for Cyril, and he quickly came over, recognizing the two at once. The mother clenched her daughter’s hand nervously but bowed her head low. “Your Grace, thank you for saving my daughter the other day. A-and please forgive me for the rudeness I showed!”

His eyes widened with surprise at the unexpected apology. His expression softened then, and he spoke gently. “There is no need for that. None at all.

Anybody would lose their composure when hearing their child was in danger. I'm just glad your daughter is safe."

The mother trembled. "Such a virtuous and kindhearted lord you are... How could I have been so rude?! My daughter told me all about how gallant and caring you were when we returned home. Only then did I realize my foolishness. Once again, please forgive my rudeness!"

Cyril gave a troubled smile. "Please, I only did what is expected of a knight," he said, politely trying to bring her apologies to an end.

The girl let go of her mother's hand and trotted closer to him. Reflexively, he bent down to her eye level. She stopped before his feet and pulled out a yellow fruit bigger than his fist from her skirt pocket. Smiling, she held out the fruit to him with both of her tiny hands. "Thank you for saving me from the scary monsters. You can have this yummy fruit!"

Cyril smiled softly. "Oh, this is the fruit you taught me about in the forest, isn't it? The one you have to pick while it's still green so the birds don't get to it and then leave to ripen?"

"*Rye-pin?*" the girl repeated.

"It means to leave the fruit be for some time after harvesting so it can gain more flavor." He smiled broadly. "Thank you very much. This is a ripe and lovely fruit."

The girl patted the fruit now in his hands. "I'll make it more yummy now! Yummy, yummy!"

He laughed and took a knife out from his chest pocket, smoothly peeling the fruit before splitting it down the middle. "Here, why don't we share?" He held out half to the girl.

The girl inched closer to him and bit into her half. "It's yummy, right?"

He took a bite. "That it is."

Watching it all unfold, the mother muttered to herself. "What a kind lord he truly is...might he be a spirit?"

Ho ho ho! Oh, Captain...some interesting rumors are beginning to pop up

around you, huh? We'd make an interesting combination. A so-called Great Saint and a so-called spirit.

Many more townspeople came by afterward, and I got to enjoy a lot of interesting conversations. Soon enough, it was time for the dance offerings, so the performers got on stage. Just like with the festival celebrating the Great Saint's visit, the adult women were the first to dance. They twisted and wound their bodies nimbly, for what seemed like some kind of jellyfish dance. I recalled that I'd guessed this was the dolphin dance during the festival and had to deal with a lot of trouble as a result.

Chief Radek was sitting nearby, so I took the opportunity to ask him something I'd been wondering about. "Um, Chief Radek? You told me before that your events always begin with the most important dance. Are jellyfish important to your culture or something?"

He gave a great big enthusiastic nod. "Indeed, Your Holiness. Three hundred years ago, Your Holiness saw this dance and called it the jellyfish dance. Since then, the jellyfish dance has been an important dance to our people."

"Uh...wait, I thought it was actually a dolphin dance?"

"It matters not what dance it was three hundred years ago. Her Holiness said it was a jellyfish dance, so a jellyfish dance it has been," he said, and my stomach twisted into a knot.

"Wh-what?! But that's like saying up is down!! You guys would twist things so much for the Great Saint?!" I exclaimed, but nobody backed me up.

The always-impartial Cyril gave me an indecipherable look, and Saviz watched with silent amusement. Their faces betrayed none of their thoughts, a skill perhaps learned from working at the political center of the kingdom. Only Kurtis showed any expression, zealously shaking his head at me as though to tell me they were only paying due respect to the words of Her Holiness. And while I wanted to scold him for placing so much weight on my every action, I couldn't help but find his comparative simplicity darling, now.

Regardless, if my superiors chose to stay silent on the matter, there was no point in me complaining any further. Instead, I decided to just enjoy all the dances the townspeople were putting on.

Come to think of it, I'd missed my chance to watch these dances all those years ago. In a way, that made them even more special now. I could see the years of effort the townspeople put into this tradition and pressed my hand to my heart, overwhelmed by emotion.

The chief noticed me tense up. "Your Holiness, is something the matter?"

I looked back at him and shared my honest feelings. "No, I just... Well, I'm a bit overwhelmed by how wonderful this all is. Your people have passed down such an incredible, beautiful tradition."

He squinted his eyes, as if they stung from staring at something far too bright. He opened his mouth to speak, then a gust of wind blew in and swayed the trees. The myriad of richly colored strips of cloth hanging from the branches began to sway with the branches in the breeze.

"The souls! They have returned!"

"Welcome back, Brother!"

"Father, I've mixed your favorite drink for you!"

The townspeople looked up and whispered heartfelt words. Some smiled at the sight of the fluttering cloths, and some lowered their heads in prayer. All paid respects to the departed in their own way.

Observing the silence for a moment, Cyril looked up and muttered, "Such a wonderful way to pay one's respects. I was born and raised here in Sutherland, and grew up observing its peoples' faith and diligence firsthand. Perhaps that's part of why I became a knight: to protect the kingdom and its people."

A silence fell at the sound of his words. It seemed that the townspeople were listening to him with a discreet sort of intensity. Perhaps noticing their eyes upon him, he continued firmly, "I am most certainly lacking as a lord, but I believe my being here has meaning. Surely, I must be here to protect you all."

His voice was quiet, but beneath his words lay a bedrock of sincerity that resonated with the townspeople. They lowered their gazes and nodded, showing their respect.

The chief, sitting nearby, turned to face him. "Lord Sutherland, a terrible

incident occurred between our peoples ten years ago. I believe it is now time for us to move on from the past, not by forgetting it or by embracing a grudge but by coming together once more.”

I would later learn this was the first time the chief acknowledged the Lament of Sutherland in an official setting.

Cyril looked at the chief in surprise, but the chief continued in a soft voice. “Your Grace lost both parents to the incident ten years ago, but you still held a memorial ceremony every year, without blaming us. And now...you’ve even returned Her Holiness to us and saved our people from ruin once again. I now have nothing but gratitude for Your Grace.”

A silence followed. No one dared to break it; the quiet of the townspeople was itself a sign of agreement with the words of their Chief.

“Thank you, Chief,” said Cyril at last. “Yes, let us forge a new bond. As lord of Sutherland, I swear to do all I can for your people.” His lips formed a lovely smile, one of true joy and kindness. One by one, the townspeople smiled as well, and I felt a warm and overwhelming happiness and gratitude burning from the bottom of my heart.

Oh...thank goodness! I thought. It didn’t make sense for the people of Sutherland and Cyril to butt heads when neither party was at fault. At last, both of their feelings were getting across to one another.

In the middle of this joyful atmosphere, a lone woman had a flash of inspiration and raised her voice. “Oh! Say, don’t you think Lord Sutherland might be the reincarnation of Her Holiness’s personal knight three hundred years ago, the Blue Knight?”

“What?!” Kurtis’s jaw dropped. He jolted up in his seat from behind Cyril. “That’s nonsense...!”

The townspeople agreed with the woman, though, and rather excitedly at that.

“That’s crazy, I was thinking the *exact* same thing!” one of them said. “His Grace was the first to jump into the ocean when Her Holiness fell, and he stayed by her side to support her afterward! It just makes too much sense to be

untrue!”

“He was also the one who brought Her Holiness to Sutherland! *Just* like the Blue Knight three hundred years ago!”

“Yeah, yeah! And it makes sense he’d be lord of Sutherland too, because the Blue Knight was as well!”

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa*!” Kurtis exclaimed, forgetting his rank and wedging his way between the townspeople. “What are you all talking about?! There’s no way the Blue Knight would be someone who’s image just screams ‘nobility’ like that! I mean, look at me, right? Wasn’t I by Lady Fi’s side this whole time too?”

Soon enough, Kurtis and the townspeople were in a rather strident back-and-forth argument with no end in sight.

Wh-what am I supposed to do here...? I had no idea how to resolve this situation, but I figured stopping Kurtis was a good start.

I tugged at his arm. He noticed me and stooped down so I could whisper in his ear. “Calm down, Kurtis. Weren’t you the one who said we should be using the townspeople’s misunderstandings to our advantage? If we leave things be, they’ll welcome Captain Cyril with open arms!”

“Y-yes, but...*I’m* the Blue Knight, you know?” he said in a pleading voice.

“And it gets even better!” I insisted, ignoring his objection. “Cyril probably knows he has no ties to the Blue Knight. If we go along with the townspeople, he’ll assume there’s no way in the world they’re right about *me* being the Great Saint, because they’re so wrong about *him*! Two birds, one stone!”

“W-well, perhaps, but—”

I ignored Kurtis’s counterargument and turned to smile at Cyril.

“Fia,” said Cyril, seeing something mischievous in my grin, “let’s not do anything rash...”

I pretended not to hear him. “Captain Cyril! You know, you’ve *always* looked really nostalgic to me, and now I know why! All this time, why...I’ve been hanging out with my good buddy Canopus!”

The townspeople immediately began to clamor.

"I *knew* it! Look, Her Holiness has recognized her personal knight!"

"So Lord Sutherland *was* the Blue Knight all along? Oh, how wonderful!"

Saviz chuckled softly at the spectacle, Kurtis stood stock-still in a daze, and Cyril...had a *frighteningly* lovely smile on his face.

"Oh, you've done it now, Fia."

As delightful as Cyril's smile was, his whisper was downright *lethal*.

H-huh? That's weird. Captain Cyril's not mad, is he? I thought, looking at his chilling smile. He smiled fairly often, but I knew from experience that his smiles didn't necessarily reflect a good mood. Judging from that resentful whisper I'd just heard, this...was not one of his *good mood* smiles.

"C-Captain Cyril? Um...do you remember when you said you would do whatever you could to support my Great Saint act? W-well, what better way to do that then as the Great Saint's personal knight?" I whispered so only he could hear. Not that anyone would've heard even if I'd spoken normally, what with all the hubbub around us about his shocking secret identity.

From a distance, it probably seemed like we were having a happy little chit-chat, what with his bright smile. In reality, of course, his voice positively dripped with resentment. "You must be joking, Fia. The Blue Knight was an outstanding knight, personally serving the Great Saint herself. Somebody like me is unfit to bear his name. If I'm seen as his reincarnation, the people of this land will treat my actions as the Blue Knight's own. They'll see me and be disappointed, thinking that the Blue Knight was less of a man than they'd imagined. I do not wish to sully his honor."

"Huh? B-but you're an outstanding knight yourself! Sure, the Blue Knight was pretty incredible, but..." I stopped there, feeling Kurtis's gaze. Oops...here I was, talking as if I knew the Blue Knight myself. "But that's basically all there is to it! Yep, that's what I've heard! And y-you, you're just as fine of a knight as him! Probably!"

Cyril smiled softly. "I appreciate your kind words, but that is your bias as someone in the same brigade. As a knight captain, I do believe myself

somewhat experienced, but I am nowhere near the heights of the Great Saint's personal knight."

This, coming from someone who is the captain of the most prestigious brigade as well as the brigades' strongest fighter? Just how modest was he? Or rather, wasn't he overestimating the Blue Knight a bit? He probably assumed someone who served the Great Saint had to be perfect in every way—always calm, all-capable, and self-sacrificing. Sure, Canopus was strong and talented, but he was also very childish. He always had something to quip back when my previous life's brothers had some nonsense to tell me.

With all of Cyril's misplaced expectations of the Blue Knight in mind, I began to wonder whether he might have similar misplaced expectations for the Great Saint. Perhaps my acting hadn't been convincing enough for him?

"You really are just as fine of a knight as the Blue Knight!" I told him. "By the way, how's my acting been so far? Has it matched your image of the Great Saint?"

I could only hope I hadn't gone and sent whatever lofty expectations he held for the Great Saint tumbling down. Of course, the old me *was* pretty similar to the current me, so it'd really be on him for expecting too much.

He frowned ever-so-slightly. "That's the most difficult question you could've asked. Looking at the results alone, you've performed perfectly. The townspeople have accepted you as the Great Saint and, by extension, have accepted the duchy and the knights."

Oh! Hey, that was more positive than I'd expected. "Huh? W-well, uh, I didn't really do much..."

He smiled with amusement. "Nonsense. You've done what no one else has been able to do for a decade. If you told me five, or even ten years ago, that there would be a day the townspeople and us could see eye to eye again, I wouldn't believe you. Only you could have made this possible."

"Y-you're exaggerating! You and Captain Kurtis could've easily achieved this yourselves!" I said, waving my hands.

Kurtis made a face. "Lady Fi, please. Fixing such damaged relations would be

impossible for me!” He gave a defeated sigh and muttered faintly, “You always did fail to understand your own greatness...”

I couldn’t hear his mumbling, though. “What’s that?”

As if suddenly remembering something, he fixed me with a sharp glare and whispered in a voice that only I could hear. “I believe I’ve told you a number of times before, but the things you do are not necessarily so easy for others to imitate. In the first place...” He put a hand to his hip and sat up straight, which was a red flag if I’d ever seen one. I could only assume some memories from his past life had surfaced mid-conversation and that he was going to lecture me on something I’d done in my past life.

Of course, I wasn’t exactly in the mood for a scolding three hundred years in the making, so I looked to Cyril for help.

With a firm, serious look in his eyes, Cyril nodded. “Kurtis is right. Reconciling with the people was an impossible task for me as well. You were the perfect person to earn their respect and adoration. If you hadn’t come along, none of this could have happened.”

“S-sure...” Not wanting to make things worse for myself, I just nodded along. I didn’t know what might trigger more lecturing, so it was better to not say much at all.

“Fia, you truly are amazing,” said Cyril. “While this talk of you being the Great Saint’s reincarnation is nonsense, it remains a fact that you’ve gained the townspeople’s trust. It’s thanks to you that the people, the knights...and yes, the duchy have made peace.” He smiled as though freed of something and extended a hand. “It is a difficult thing to live bearing hate and sadness, and yet forgiveness isn’t easily bestowed either. But you’ve earned the townspeople’s forgiveness as though it were nothing, all while bringing a smile to everyone’s faces. Heh...perhaps you have some undiscovered magic that brings smiles to all you meet, eh?”

He took my hands and squeezed them lightly. “Do you remember?” He continued. “I once told you that I had a duty to fix my family’s mistake, and I have spent years trying, with nothing to show for it. It has been my greatest wish.”

“Yep, you said something like that,” If I recalled correctly, he had said that a few days ago while gazing out on Sutherland’s ocean. I was worried then—he’d seemed so broody, but now he looked downright refreshed. I smiled, knowing now that he was finally free from his long-held worries. “Good for you, Captain. Your kindness got through to everyone, just like I said it would.”

He went wide-eyed for a moment, then beamed. “Truly...your world is so simple that it’s beautiful. And it would seem you still don’t quite know your own worth.”

He dropped to a knee, kept his gaze low, and quietly continued. “Perhaps this is an easy feat to you, and perhaps you still do not understand your own value. But I know full well the significance of it all. I will not forget this favor. Fia, one day I will repay you in full. I swear it as a knight.”

He then kissed the back of my hand, performing the knight’s vow.



The townspeople saw and began to excitedly exclaim.

“His Grace really is the Blue Knight! He’s just sworn to serve Her Holiness again!”

“Sir Blue Knight, please protect Her Holiness well!”

“Huh? W-wait!” I said, flustered by all the sudden cheering.

Cyril playfully winked. “Ha ha, is something the matter, Your Holiness? There’s nothing strange about your knight pledging his loyalty, is there?”

I had no doubt his promise to repay my favor was in earnest, but...when I realized that it was all part of his teasing, that dashed any of his seriousness. Ugh, I bet this was his revenge for me calling him the Blue Knight. I hung my head in defeat. “Y-you got me!” I exclaimed.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I spotted Saviz smiling, the first truly happy smile I’d seen on him yet. I couldn’t help but do a double take. *What’s he so happy for?* Unable to come up with a reason why, I just tilted my head.

That’s when he spoke out, sounding utterly delighted. “Incredible, Fia. You’ve seized control of the people of Sutherland *and* you’ve won over its lord. It’s just as Kurtis said: Sutherland is already in your hands.”

Side Story:

Saviz, Commander of the Knight Brigades

“FIA RUUD...”

I sat down on my room's sofa and muttered that name to no one. My manservant approached with a glass of something amber and handed it to me. I took a sip and sunk into the sofa.

My eyes fell closed as all of today's fatigue came crashing down at once. I thought of how I'd allowed myself to be holed up in my office yet again today, then thought of Fia. There were too many mysteries surrounding the girl. Next time she was involved in something odd, I would check on the situation myself.

As knight commander, it was always difficult to see the truth for what it was. Though they meant well, my knights carefully filtered what information came my way. They only wanted to show me what they believed was fit to be shown. But a small piece of the picture does not always reveal the greater whole. At such times, I made it my duty to break from my schedule and investigate matters firsthand. Only by seeing things with my own eyes and experiencing things directly had I come to understand many mysteries. And yet...Fia Ruud remained outside my understanding.

She had been peculiar from the start. When we fought briefly for the exhibition match during the new recruit welcoming ceremony, she came at me with everything she had. Despite battling against the leader of the Knight Brigades, an opponent many times stronger than her, she moved with a tensionless grace and displayed fine swordsmanship. That alone would make her memorable, but there was something more to her.

She possessed the eyes of a ruler, analyzing her surroundings with perfect calm, even pinpointing that old wound of mine where none other could perceive it. What was more, the ordinary-looking sword she held proved to be a treasure from the Golden Age, one that was even camouflaged with magic. She claimed to have obtained it unknowingly, but one would have to be naive to

believe such a boldfaced lie. By what manner of coincidence could one with such rare, perceptive eyes also just so happen to come across a Golden Age treasure?

From our first meeting, I'd been left constantly wondering—just who *was* this girl?

I next saw her at Starfall Forest. The knights had surrounded a deep-forest monster and were somehow fighting the beast according to the orders of none other than Fia Ruud. I questioned her—just how far could those penetrating eyes see?—and found she could discern the monster's unique characteristics, and even managed to somehow gauge its health. That alone had been shocking enough, but the surprises only continued.

Fia was so loved by the spirits that they changed bitter-tasting fruit into sweet ones the moment she tasted them.

“But it's truly regrettable...” I mused. “I'm sure you would have been a splendid saint if only you could've used healing magic.”

Although I hadn't intended to say those words aloud, they came from my heart. She could have been a saint rivaling our era's first or second greatest if she could harness healing magic. I was sure she'd agree.

But to my surprise, she simply replied: “That's all right. I already have all that I could need.”

Odd. There was not a sliver of doubt in her satisfied smile. Every woman in the kingdom wished to be a saint, envied them. Did she not?

Curious to hear more of her thoughts, I asked her what she thought of saints later that night.

She smiled, amused. “How do you feel about the saints? Do you want to worship them like gods too? Heh heh, no...of course not. Saints aren't some bunch of distant, fickle gods. No, the saints are the shield of the knights...”

Her words resonated deeply with me. She held the saints to a beautiful ideal. What a sight it would be, to see the saints wield their miraculous powers to

protect knights...but such a thing was impossible, of course.

The knights were the shield of the saints, but the reverse could never be true. The saints sincerely believed themselves above all earthly matters. They would never even entertain the idea of putting themselves in harm's way for another. Fia's vision of the ideal saint was unmoored from reality...and yet I was fond of it all the same. Such a strange vision...I could never come up with it myself. Unique it may be, but it was not unpleasant. The thought left me invigorated, as if a soothing breeze had passed by.

It was difficult not to read too deeply into her words, especially as her hair and eyes were the precise shade of red and gold as the legendary Great Saint. But I wasn't the only one with a growing interest in her; Cyril began to watch her closely as well.

Cyril fixated on saints—his mother had been one. It wasn't hard to imagine what was going through his mind when he heard Fia's thoughts on how the saints *should* be, considering that odd resemblance she possessed to the Great Saint herself.

But it didn't end there. Desmond also began to watch Fia closely, despite his general distrust of women. Zackary was clearly fond of her too. And Quentin? He was enthralled by her.

Again and again, that question marched through my mind—just who *was* this girl? One proud knight captain after another found themselves pulled into her orbit.

My calm contemplation ended there, however, as an emergency report from Sutherland came in. Fia had apparently been recognized as the Great Saint's reincarnation.

"Fia's been *what*?" This was the first time I had ever wasted breath on something I'd heard so clearly.

The knight reporting to me did not hesitate to repeat himself. "Fia Ruud of the First Knight Brigade has been recognized as the Great Saint's reincarnation by the people of Sutherland."

"Oh. I...see." I let my weight sink further into the sofa and crossed my legs.

Sutherland was a stagnant place, rife with complex, unresolved issues. It was also the land Cyril governed. He blamed himself for the tragedies that had begun with his mother's death. In a sense, he was bound to the land by his own guilt.

Was it possible for Fia, a *knight*, to be mistaken for the Great Saint in such a place? Surely not, despite the color of her hair and eyes. So how...?

My heartbeat quickened. This was one of those incidents that I was compelled to confirm with my own eyes. I jolted up and immediately began to command the knights around me. "We depart for Sutherland in an hour! We'll be away from the Royal Capital for one week, including travel time. If there is any urgent business that must be dealt with, present it now! Prepare men and supplies for the journey. Inform Desmond at once!"

Knights bolted from the room as a flurry of activity began. I watched them leave out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't help but smile. "So, Sutherland begins to move once again," I murmured, unable to suppress a tinge of excitement in my voice. "And it's for the first time in ten years. Hard to believe..."

I would set out to see with my own eyes what exactly Fia had done, and just what change had overcome the people of Sutherland.

We reached Sutherland at dawn after riding for two days with only short breaks. According to the schedule, it was the day of the memorial ceremony, which should have been already underway.

I spurred my horse on to the location of the ceremony and was greeted by a strange sight. The knights and people of Sutherland were...jumping off the cliff one after another? How bizarre.

Determined to get to the bottom of this, I sped to the beach where the cliff-divers were returning to dry land. The timing was perfect: The sun began to peek over the horizon just as the divers returned to the beach. A single beam of light came, then another, dying the ocean a deep red. Illuminated amid the light stood a red more radiant than the sun—Fia. Even from a distance, her hair blazed.

I was captivated by the sight of her when, suddenly, the townspeople gathered along the beach fell down one after another. Perplexed, I strained my eyes and saw a man who looked to be the chief loudly extolling Fia.

Interesting. The misunderstandings have only grown in intensity.

It appeared the townspeople had fallen to their knees from the sheer awe of seeing Fia—even though she was sopping wet from head to toe.

“I thought it was strange enough that you were all having a nighttime swim, but this is stranger still.”

Her eyes grew wide when she saw me, and she quickly scurried over. She was acting as she always did, but the townspeople watched her intensely all the same, a look of veneration on their faces. For what felt like the umpteenth time, I wondered just what in the world had this girl *done*?

I’d seen firsthand how the people here treated knights. They kept their distance, refusing to associate. Yet now the townspeople were handing the wet knights towels and even *thanking* them. What was I to make of this sudden reversal? Had Fia undone the grudge, binding Sutherland with some sort of fairy-tale magic?

I shook my head clear of such thoughts and continued to watch the unthinkable scene play out before me. The chief of Sutherland, who had never once tried to bridge the divide between us, suggested that we combine our ceremony with theirs. It was an unbelievable move toward reconciliation from the townspeople. Everyone waited with bated breath, silently watching Cyril regain his composure. He accepted the offer, unable to fully contain his happiness.

In the background, Fia watched the two with simple joy, as though a mere spectator. I had a suspicion—no, I had complete certainty that she had no idea what she herself had just accomplished.

Later, I had a meeting with Cyril and Kurtis, but...there was something clearly different about the latter. Kurtis had a subdued confidence and a newfound calm about him now. Although he was still reserved, I could detect an intensity buried deep within, like billowing flame. They say the nature of a man can change in a mere three days’ time, but no such change comes without impetus.

Just what could spark such a great change in him?

I wasn't left wondering for long, though, for soon enough he had opened his mouth to sing Fia's praises. No matter what topic we moved to, he found a way to bring her up and heap praise on her benevolence and good deeds. Eventually, I couldn't even feign interest anymore.

Even Cyril, for all of his politeness, completely gave up and started uttering noncommittal replies like "Uh-huh" and "Is that so?" as Kurtis's words went in one ear and out the other. Yes, my most talented knight captains were becoming rather odd under the influence of Fia, but never before had I seen a case this severe.

Eventually, it was time for the ceremony. The three of us made for the mansion courtyard where the service was being held. Fia was sitting close by, so I decided to monitor her.

According to Cyril, the people of Sutherland had been saved by the Great Saint three hundred years ago when facing annihilation at the hands of a disease. Since then, they had longed for her return so they could have a chance to repay the favor. This, coupled with some words Fia said that bore a resemblance to those of the Great Saint, caused the townspeople to mistake Fia for a reincarnation of their hero despite not being a saint herself. Her eye and hair color likely played a major role in the confusion.

The townspeople treated Fia with respect. One smiling towns person after another came to her side to thank and honor her. Their gratitude spread beyond just Fia, however. Here and there, knights and townspeople mingled. A mother and daughter came to apologize to Cyril. Then, at long last, the chief offered to officially reconcile with Cyril. Cyril accepted, and the people of Sutherland were finally, officially at peace with the knights.

Bluntly, it was an unbelievable turn of events. After ten years of stagnation, Sutherland was moving forward once again. I couldn't help but smile and laugh. I'd suspected that it would take decades more to reach this point, certain that the grudge ran too deep to be forgotten. But Fia had undone that grudge, and all too easily.

Whatever Fia could see with those eyes of hers, I found it hard to believe that

she could have predicted all of this. From my observations, she spent the event simply eating what she wanted to and chatting away with the townspeople. How could someone like this so easily achieve the impossible?

Lightning does not strike twice. With so many impossibilities occurring around Fia, there was clearly *something* else at play, but what? I had to throw in the towel—even when I came here and observed her directly, the truth eluded me.

Unintentionally, my mouth curled into a smile. Fia remained ever the mystery, and yet that fact left me invigorated instead of frustrated. I could sense, somehow, that there was no wickedness in her heart. Therefore, there was no rush to unveil her, only the anticipation of discovery to come at a later time.

How nice it would be to take her aside and question her. I was about to do just that when I noticed Cyril was on one knee before her.

“Do you remember?” he asked softly. “I once told you that I had a duty to fix my family’s mistake, and I have spent years trying with nothing to show for it. It has been my greatest wish.” He then performed the knight’s vow.

Cyril’s performing the knight’s vow to someone who’s not a saint? I thought in disbelief, peering at his face. But there wasn’t a shadow of worry to be found in his expression. *Ah, I see. You’ve finally been freed from the curse of this land, and from the curse of the saints.*

There was no doubt in my mind that he had overcome the suffering and doubt that his mother cursed him with...that vile curse of the saints he’d borne for some twenty years.

A pang of sadness gripped my heart then. *Now I’m the only one bound by the curse*, I thought. But my sadness soon turned to joy. Cyril was free. Now nothing could hurt this loyal, honest man.

“Incredible, Fia,” I said, overwhelmed by gratitude. “You’ve seized control of the people of Sutherland *and* you’ve won over its lord. It’s just as Kurtis said: Sutherland is already in your hands.”

To my surprise, Fia grimaced upon hearing my words. I couldn’t help but feel even more amused by that—what a strange girl she was! She had influence over the highest-standing duchy, and before my eyes had gained the sworn

loyalty of the highest-standing knight captain...and yet she saw no value in either thing.

She was free of worldly desires like honor and material possessions. No, her relief came from the fact that the people of Sutherland were happy once more and that Cyril was free of his worries. She was pure.

“Fia, I have never met a person quite like you. Your true worth is beyond my ability to measure.”

She tilted her head quizzically. “Thank you...? Of course, I owe it all to your good guidance.”

I laughed, unable to contain my amusement. To think even praise from me would mean nothing to her! Although my words were the highest order of praise one could receive, she received them humbly.

It was hard to *stop* laughing in the face of such wonders. Eventually, a new tray of food was brought over: a traditional Sutherland dish, deep-sea shellfish baked with flour. For some reason, the atmosphere tensed the moment it arrived. The arms of the man bringing the tray over were trembling, and everyone else now seemed just as high-strung.

As a member of royalty, the first thing that came to mind was the possibility the food was poisoned. A chill ran down my back as I watched Fia grab the food.

“Fia!” I stood to my feet and grabbed her arm, but she was already chewing.

“C-Commander, wh-what’s wrong? Oh, do you perhaps not like shellfish? You should give this one a try though, it’s called *oachun*, and it’s really good! *Om nom nom...*” she said, continuing to chew. Had she not noticed the tension in the air?

I had a hard time believing the townspeople would do anything to her, but how else could I explain this sudden shift? Immediately, I thrust my fingers into her mouth.

Strangely, the townspeople seemed to relax completely upon hearing Fia speak. In fact...they were in tears, smiling as though reassured of something. Then and there, I understood that it was not the food the townspeople were tense about but Fia’s reaction toward it. Similarly, it was her reaction that had

set them at ease. But why?

I squinted my eyes thoughtfully...when I heard a panicked voice from down around my chest.

“C-C-Commbanther! Puh, culd chu pwease thake yorr fingerth outh of muh mowth? I can’t h eath!”

“You do not feel ill, do you?” I asked. Judging from the townspeople’s reaction, the chance of poisoning was low, and there was no way she’d feel anything unless it was fast-acting poison, but I asked anyway.

“I fweel fwine!” she eagerly replied.

Hmm. Her complexion seemed normal, so I set her free.

As though waiting for an opening, the chief and a number of other townspeople drew close and took a knee at Fia’s feet.

“Chief Radek?” Fia said curiously.

The chief lowered his head. A townsperson to his left, also on one knee, offered Fia a large bowl draped in an elaborate cloth. Ten or so transparent stones sat atop it.

“Miss Fia,” said the chief somberly, “these are stones gathered from the same shellfish used in the *oatsun* dish you just ate. Only we web-handed former islanders can reach the deep waters where these shellfish dwell. For that reason, our people have spent many years protecting these stones. While it is not enough to fully repay our debt to you, I wish to offer you these stones and any more we may collect in the future.”

Fia’s eyes went wide the moment she saw the stones, though I had a feeling the shock Cyril and I felt was many times greater than hers—did she truly know the significance of this offering? These stones were the very reason that Cyril, a man of royal blood who normally would have territory close to the Royal Capital, was the lord of a territory so far removed.

“C-C-Commander,” said Fia nervously, staring at the stones, “aren’t these holy stones?”

So she *did* know what they were. Then she surely knew the great significance

of their offering. “You know what these are?” I asked, just to confirm.

She replied with a serious look and a deep nod. “O-of course! These are beautiful stones that would be the envy of *any* lady, you know? Plus...if I sold these, I’d be rich!”

“Fia, you...” At an utter loss for words, I heaved a great sigh. But I suppose there was no way an ordinary knight like her would know their true value...

Chapter 31:

A Gift for the Great Saint

THE TOWNSPERSON KNEELING by the chief's side offered a bowl to me containing transparent, shiny stones. Wide-eyed, I said, "C-C-Commander, aren't these holy stones?"

"You know what these are?" he replied.

It was clear what he was really saying: These glistening precious stones were far too valuable for someone like me.

I swallowed. "O-of course! These are beautiful stones that would be the envy of *any* lady, you know? Plus...if I sold these, I'd be rich!"

"Fia, you..." His voice trailed off for a moment before he collected himself. "Just as you say, these are called holy stones. And they are far more valuable than magic stones."

"Huh? O-oh, you don't say!"

Holy stones were super rare three hundred years ago, so I'd only ever seen a few and never really knew what their use might be. To me, they were just pretty stones that could store a small amount of healing magic.

I looked at the holy stones with excitement, wondering just what new way people had found to use them.

At that moment, Cyril—jeez, when had he snuck up to my side, anyway?—spoke up. "Holy stones can store healing magic. Possessing one may grant users powers akin to those of a saint."

"Right." Even I knew that. But the holy stones only stored a minuscule amount of healing magic, so there had to be another reason for their high value.

I stared up at Cyril expectantly, my chest pounding with curious anticipation. He blinked at me, confused.

"Err...apologies, Fia, but did you understand what I said?" he continued after a

short silence. “I said these stones can manifest effects similar to the powers of a saint.”

“No, I got it. They can store a small amount of a saint’s power. Yep.” Weird that he was so stuck on this point.

“Ah, I understand now,” he said, relief clear in his voice. “You’re close, but that’s not quite it! These stones can store the power of *many* saints. That is to say, these stones allow one to use healing magic *equal* to that of a number of saints.”

“Huh? But you can only store a tiny amount of healing magic in these stones.”

“No, Fia. Holy stones can store many saints’ worth of magic.”

“Um?” I said.

“Um?” he repeated back.

I tilted my head waaay to the side. Cyril was usually really good at explaining stuff, but I couldn’t make sense of this explanation at all.

Kurtis intervened then, frantic. “L-Lady Fi! You understand how it is very difficult for a lone saint to heal a wound, yes? Which is why it takes multiple saints to heal? That is why it is so fantastical that these stones can store the power of multiple saints! What is more, it can store enough for multiple *modern* saints to run themselves dry of magic! Incredible, is it not?! Isn’t it?!”

“Ohhh!” My eyes shot wide. I understood now, albeit a little late.

“It takes time for healing potions to take effect,” Kurtis explained, buying me time to sort through my thoughts and avoid suspicion. “If one uses a healing potion in battle, they have to retreat for a short while until their wounds heal. Holy stones get around that problem however and allow one to fight continuously.”

I-I see... I understood what Cyril meant now, but I felt bummed out by it. The fact that modern saints had far smaller magic reserves was new to me, but it lined up with what I’d seen. The abilities of the saints I saw on my first monster hunting expedition were far lower than what was standard in my past life. It had taken three saints several dozens of seconds to heal an arm wound. What’s

more, the saints seemed pretty tired afterward, probably from having used the majority of their small magic reserves.

While I knew the saints had become weaker, I still wanted to believe something could be done. I'd assumed that while their magic output might be low, their magic *reserves* were fine. After all, only three saints had been assigned to over twenty knights. That ratio would've made sense with how often knights were injured in my past life, but I guess knights got injured less often nowadays. Thinking back on it, the only reason so many people got injured in Starfall Forest was because we'd encountered an unusually powerful monster...

And now it made sense. *So...that's it.* The current world's saint's had such minuscule magic reserves that these holy stones, even with their tiny capacity, took many saints to fill.

Dejected, I looked up at Kurtis. "I...understand. These holy stones require multiple saints to fill, right?"

"Yes." Kurtis gave me a worried look.

I'm fine, Kurtis. It's my own fault for getting my hopes up. Cyril was giving me a curious look now too.

Man, I'd really done it now. I forced a smile and threw my hands up in the air. "Aaah! S-sorry for being so slow on the uptake! I understand how amazing these things are now! Yep, they're super-duper amazing! They can store sooo many saint's worth of magic! Wowie-zowie!"

"Putting aside that your acting skills are as dreadful as ever," said Cyril, "do you truly not understand how incredible these stones are? Unless...I see. You haven't had much real combat experience yet, so you don't know the importance of a saint's power." With a troubled expression, Cyril looked to Saviz and shrugged.

Saviz stared at me straight-on now and, without any emotion on his face, calmly said, "The effects of these holy stones are as Cyril and Kurtis explained. Their value on the battlefield is immeasurable. Countless lives may be saved with them. Moreover, you are being offered the right to these mighty objects and any future hoards of them from the *only* people that can gather them."

“I...am?” Finally *actually* understanding the situation, I swallowed.

“I-I can’t accept such valuable stones!” I exclaimed to the chief. Thank goodness the others had explained everything, because there was no way I would’ve put that together. I’d known that saints had gotten really weak, but this was just too much.

But the chief was having none of it. “Please, I insist that you take them! Our people hardly ever engage in battle and thus have no need for these stones. You are a knight, and I refuse to believe that this is mere coincidence. These stones were meant for you!”

“B-but there’s no way I could just take something so valuable from you. So, um, what if I paid the fair price?” I suggested. But no sooner had I said that than I realized that there was no way I would be able to afford these. Still, maybe the Knight Brigades could? “Or what if the Knight Brigades bought these? They’re really valuable, so it’d be better if a proper organization owned them instead, yeah? The Commander and Captain Cyril said they are pretty useful in battle, so I bet they’d be willing to take them off your hands.”

Worried I might be pushing my superiors into something they weren’t willing to do, I nervously glanced toward Cyril. “C-Captain Cyril,” I said, “would the Knight Brigades be willing to buy the holy stones?”

Stony-faced, he gave a clear, unmistakable nod.

I let out a sigh of relief. “I-It looks like they’ll buy them. How many they buy will probably depend on the price, though. Um...Captain Cyril, what’s the market price?”

“There is no market price for holy stones,” he said softly. “Such an item would never appear on the market in the first place. Please name a price instead, as high as you’d like. We’ll pay anything for them.”

“Wha-huh?” My jaw dropped. *S-so...the sky’s the limit? I never expected they’d be literally priceless! Wait, is it even okay for Captain Cyril to say all that? I guess the people of Sutherland are too honest to overcharge. But how are you supposed to price something priceless?* I looked at the chief, wondering what

he'd do.

He gave me a troubled look. "Oh, I couldn't charge you for these, Miss Fia. My wife is a terribly frightening woman. If I were to charge you for these holy stones, she would no doubt kick me out of the house; and I don't think I could endure living out on the street at my age."

"Huh?"

I feel like I've heard similar words before... I thought back to the time the sugared grilled fruits store refused my money. Were all the married men of Sutherland kept on a tight leash or something?

Unsure what to do, I found myself staring at Cyril. I was about to say something, but he beat me to the punch. "Fia, I have too much stake in this matter and cannot be the one to make a decision."

My eyes were wide with awe. *Wh-whoa. You're amazing, Captain Cyril! You knew what I was about to do just from me looking at you!* He could sense that I was gonna make him do the hard part, huh? Impressive! I stared up at him with admiration.

Cyril furrowed his brow. "And don't you look to me for advice either. I have my own interests I must prioritize."

H-he's right! A duke couldn't just do as he pleased. How silly of me. Now fully understanding that I couldn't depend on Cyril here, I looked to a different man, one very biased in my favor but gifted nonetheless—Kurtis.

Kurtis had been one of the former islander peoples in his previous life, so he could probably understand the feelings of the chief. Surely *he* could offer some pointed words of wisdom! I looked at him hopefully.

He nodded. "Lady Fi, I believe you should accept these holy stones without payment. The Great Saint healed the people of Sutherland three hundred years ago and took no reward, so it's only fair that you accept this as a gift."

It felt a little like he was veering off-topic here. "C'mon, the Great Saint was just doing what was natural for her to do—heal. Anybody would save another's life if they could, right? It's silly to even think of expecting a reward for that."

But Kurtis didn't back down. With a deathly serious look, he said, "It's the same for the people of Sutherland. They gather deep-sea shellfish as food; the holy stones are just a rare byproduct. Why, holy stones were collected three hundred years ago as well, but saints were more plentiful then, and so the stones were simply tossed back into the sea. They had no value even as jewelry." He glanced at the chief. "Who knows? Perhaps the situation is the same today. The former islander peoples have no interest in wealth or conflict, so they have no need for these stones. But their value is great enough that even just keeping them becomes a risk, so they could simply be tossed back into the ocean... At least, that would explain why none have appeared on the market."

"What, really?!" Surprised, I looked at the chief and saw that he was nodding.

"It is *exactly* as you say, Captain Kurtis! If Miss Fia does not take these, we will simply return them to the sea."

The townspeople listening in began to pitch in, agreeing with Kurtis's words.

"Everything Captain Kurtis said is 100 percent true! It's almost scary how accurate he is!"

"Yeah, Captain Kurtis really hit the nail on the head! Please, take these holy stones off our hands, Your Holiness!"

"Nggghh..." I groaned, at my wit's end. I understood how the townspeople felt, but I still thought the holy stones should be exchanged for their proper value. These stones could save the lives of so many knights, and I wished the townspeople could be rewarded for collecting them.

Kurtis spoke up again, interrupting my thoughts. "Lady Fi, the relationship between the Great Saint and the people of Sutherland is one in which one helps the other with no expectation of reward. I believe it should stay that way."

"Yeah..." I looked the chief in the eyes now, and it felt as though a splash of cold water settled down my spinning thoughts. Kurtis was right. If the townspeople had offered me money as thanks back in the cavern when I'd healed their yellow-speckle fever, I probably would've just been disappointed in them. How was what I was trying to do any better? "Chief Radek, I was wrong. Kurtis is right, I should have never brought up money in the first place. I'm sorry I was so rude to you all."

I bowed my head in sincere apology, and the townsfolk began to bustle.

“W-wait, no, please raise your head!”

“Y-Your Holiness, it’s okay, we understand!”

Hearing all those flustered voices, I raised my head and saw the townspeople looking at me guiltily. *They really are all good-natured people*, I thought and frowned, unsure what to do.

Kurtis came to my aid then, quietly whispering to me. “I understand, Lady Fi. You see the value of these stones and are hesitant to take them for free. But it’s *precisely* because these stones are so valuable that the townspeople wish to give them to you.”

“Right.” I nodded firmly.

Kurtis beamed. “How wonderful. I’m overjoyed to see that the Great Saint I serve is so understanding of the people’s feelings.”

Sheesh, this guy is way too into me sometimes, I thought. Still, his smile reminded me of a simple truth: When you see somebody smile, you can’t help but smile back. Grinning now, I turned to the townspeople. “Thank you, everyone! These holy stones will be super useful for us knights! I’m really happy to receive them!”

Seeing my grin spread smiles among the townspeople around us. This was simply the nature of the Sutherland people—although they could easily enrich themselves, they were happy to offer up these valuable holy stones in exchange for nothing. My smile broadened as I contemplated their kindness.

Happy wrinkles lined the eyes of the chief. “Nothing could fill me with more joy than to be of aid to you, Miss Fia. Of course, we will continue to gather these stones for you from here on out as well if you’d like.”

Ah...right. Come to think of it, they did say they’d give any future holy stones to me. I felt that was a little bit too much to ask of them and wanted to refuse, but thought better of it. I mean, I couldn’t spurn their charity now, right?

I lightly shook my head to clear my mind, then looked at the townspeople’s faces again. They all nervously awaited my answer, their smiles vanished. For

the second time today I felt sober with realization: They were *worried* about whether I'd continue to accept these quite-literally priceless stones from them.

I felt the true depths of their kindness and smiled, happily and truly. "Thank you so much, everyone! I'm really, deeply grateful."

And the townspeople returned smiles that outshone even my own.

The happiness of the townspeople proved infectious; just looking at their smiles made me feel more joyful. But wasn't there something more I could do for them?

I looked to the chief. "I'd like to do something to thank you for these holy stones. Is there anything I can help you all with?"

Sure, I didn't look the part, but I was a knight. If they needed monsters fought, I could take care of that.

The chief's face lit up. "In that case, could you plant an adela tree for us once more? This time, we will be sure to protect it!"

"Huh?" Seemed like a pretty easy thing to do. Why did they need my help? Still, if that was what he wanted, I'd do it. "If that's what you wish, I'd be happy to do so right now. Um...this courtyard here is fine right?" The moment the words left my mouth, I felt the atmosphere begin to shift and realized my mistake.

A-ah, I forgot! The last adela tree was cut down by the late Duchess because it was planted here!

"Uhh, I can't just decide to plant it here on my own, now can I? How about we plant it—"

"No, no," the chief said firmly. "If the Duke gives his permission, it should be fine. We can let this adela tree commemorate the new bond between the duchy and its people."

Cyril looked surprised for a brief moment but quickly recovered. "Thank you, Chief. I wished to commemorate our new bond but felt it improper to suggest such a thing myself. Thank you for doing so." He put a hand on my back and

continued. “While I’m at it, allow me to thank you for the holy stones you’ve given Fia. We understand they’ve been gifted to her specifically and will make sure to use them in a way that pleases her.”

Huh? Wait, I thought the deal was these would be for the Knight Brigades? But when I saw the relieved looks of the townspeople, I knew I’d been mistaken. They wanted to give these stones to me as the Great Saint’s reincarnation, not as a member of the Knight Brigades. My heart warmed at that. I was happy to receive their kindness as the Great Saint.

I slowly swept my gaze over the courtyard. To plant an adela tree, I needed a suitable tree to take a branch from. I had taken a branch from the courtyard’s adela trees three hundred years ago, but I didn’t see any around at the moment.

I tilted my head, confused. The chief seemed to understand what I was looking for. “There used to be adela trees along the side of the courtyard, but they’ve since withered away. Their life span is a mere century, you see.”

“Huh? They only live a hundred years? But...how’d the tree the Great Saint planted stick around so long?”

“The Great Saint’s Tree was special; it remained lush for the three hundred years it stood until the day it was cut down. We believed it was Her Holiness herself watching over us.”

Oh? What a coincidence that the adela tree I planted lived three times its normal life span. Maybe my healing magic had somehow affected it? Healing magic *did* work on herbs and such, which is how you got healing potions. It wasn’t too outrageous to think healing magic could affect trees as well.

Oh dear. I’ve never thought to test healing magic on trees before, so I had no way of knowing how to reproduce its effects...assuming my healing magic did somehow increase the life span of the Great Saint’s Tree. For now, I guess I’d just have to put my heart into it.

Thinking all this to myself, I spotted a small adela tree off to the side of the courtyard. Huh. What was *that* doing here?

Cyril must’ve noticed the look on my face. “The townspeople weren’t the only

ones to obtain a branch of the Great Saint's Tree when it was cut down. I planted my own cutting over there."

What a thoughtful man, I thought, impressed. I approached the still-young, lush tree he had planted and snapped off a branch. Then, as everyone wished, I planted it beside the stump of the Great Saint's Tree. In my heart, I prayed that it would take root well and watch over Sutherland and its peoples for as long as it could.

"Ohh...thank you, Your Holiness!"

"We'll protect it for sure this time!"

Moved to tears, the townspeople gazed happily at the small branch. I found myself giddy as well from seeing them and whispered a promise to the young adela tree. "This time, when you grow big and bloom beautiful flowers, I'll come visit Sutherland again. I promise."

I was so sure my voice had been a faint whisper, but almost all the townspeople around me seemed to have heard, raising their voices in celebration.

"Oh, bless you, Your Holiness! It's a promise!"

"We'll be waiting for you, Your Holiness!"

I looked around and saw everyone had a smile on their face. *Hee hee...it's good that everyone's so happy.*

Kurtis came with a damp towel for me to wipe the dirt off my hands. I accepted it—he was such an attentive guy. Then again, he *was* my ex-personal knight, so maybe he was just good at knowing what I'd need before I did. He'd always been talented and perceptive, but when you threw in his ability to attend to one's needs, he really was just about perfect. Honestly, I felt spoiled having him around.

The chief, seeing Kurtis attend to me, seemed to come to a similar conclusion. He swallowed heavily, paused as if to work up courage, and spoke to Cyril. "Your Grace, I'd like to make one more request of you."

"Anything," Cyril replied.

“Captain Kurtis has been a great boon to Sutherland these past three years,” said the chief nervously. “But a knight as talented and splendid as he is should not be bound to a remote place like this. Please, take him with you as you return to the Royal Capital.”

“Huh?” Cyril said, surprise plain in his voice.

But the determined expression on the chief’s face brooked no argument.

Surprised though he was, Cyril quickly regained his composure. “Sutherland may be remote, but it is an important location to the Náv Kingdom. It *is* a duchy, after all.”

The chief gave a deep, understanding nod. “Yes, I am aware. I am also aware that it is because the holy stones can be gathered here that the kingdom places such importance on this land.”

Cyril made a face, confused.

Apologetically, the chief continued, “I was the one who introduced these stones to the market long ago.”

“I’m sorry?”

“About thirty years ago, when my son got married, I sold a holy stone to fund a grand banquet for his wedding. I had known that these stones were rare and could only be gathered by my people, and yet I still sold one without any deeper thought.”

He continued to speak with a far-off look in his eyes. “Our people have known about the stones’ effects. We knew, too, that they were a rare sort of item that would fetch a high price on the market. But it was precisely because they had such potential value that our people had decided to hide them, lest they become the seeds of conflict. Despite that, I convinced myself that selling a single stone would be fine for the sake of my son’s wedding. On a visit to the Royal Capital, I brought one to a trading firm.”

He put his hand to his chin and grimaced, lost in memory. “I was brought to another room, then. A knight was summoned, and I was interrogated as to how

I got the stone. I kept insisting that I had found it by chance in the ocean and was eventually released, but I suppose they doubted me.”

The chief grinned wryly now. “Some short while later, Sutherland, which had been under the supervision of the royal family until that point, was declared a duchy. I realized right away that it was a move to try and obtain the holy stones. It seemed that they were far more valuable than I’d first assumed. Why else would a duke make such a remote location their territory, and at such a time? Fearing that the holy stones might indeed bring some conflict to our doorstep, our people made sure to return any stones we discovered to the ocean.”

Cyril opened his mouth for a moment, as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

The chief continued, “I’m aware the holy stones could have made us a fortune, but we have a history of being persecuted and no personal desire for great wealth. Deep down, we understood that these stones could save many, but we were fearful of being pulled into meaningless strife and new waves of discrimination. For that reason, we pretended not to know of the stones.”

He let out a large sigh and looked at me. “But after seeing Miss Fia go to such lengths to do what she felt was right, we felt ashamed. Even though Her Holiness saved us, we’d spurned our chances to save others. Her Holiness would surely try to save as many people as she could, even by herself if necessary...and so we’ve chosen to give the stones over to Miss Fia. We believe she can make better use of them than we could.”

“Um...thanks for believing in me, but I don’t really know if I *can* make better use of them,” I couldn’t help but interrupt. I mean, they were pinning way too much on me here!

“Miss Fia,” said the chief, “the best use our people have for these holy stones is to make them into marbles for children.”

“I, uh, I see. When you put it like that, I...can probably figure something out, sure.”

Seeing me back down, the chief turned to Cyril. “And there you have it, Your Grace. We have surrendered all rights to these stones to Miss Fia. Furthermore, we no longer have any reservations about your knights. With the bad blood

between us gone, I can see no reason for such a talented knight captain to be stationed here any longer.” He spread his arms wide, a carefree smile appearing on his face. “The knights have shown us much kindness over the years. We are grateful for Captain Kurtis’s presence, but we will be fine with *any* knight now. From what I’ve seen of the two, Miss Fia trusts Captain Kurtis greatly, and Captain Kurtis is able to attend to Miss Fia’s needs. Moreover...” He looked over at Kurtis fondly. “In the three years he’s been here, Captain Kurtis has grown close enough to be called one of our own. Why, today he acted as a true member of our people would. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like him to stay at Miss Fia’s side. Think of him as our representative.”

Cyril, shocked silent, stared at the chief. Regaining his composure yet again, he bowed his head. “Chief, thank you for being so cooperative despite knowing our initial motivations for establishing this duchy. Certainly, my father became lord of this territory for the sake of the holy stones, but we’ve never once wanted to exploit anyone for them.” He raised his head and looked into the chief’s eyes. “The existence of holy stones has been known for quite some time, but nobody bothered to consider how they were obtained. Their true value was unknown, you see. That changed about a hundred years ago, when their properties were discovered, and then the kingdom searched for them to no avail—at least until our first clue thirty years back.”

With a stony expression, Cyril swept his gaze over all the townspeople. As though addressing them all, he raised his voice. “Despite being assigned here as lord, I did not know until recently where the holy stones were gathered from, or if *anyone* knew. But I’ve always intended to speak to you all about the properties of the stones and ask for your help in bettering the kingdom. I had hoped, too, to establish some method of gathering them and bringing wealth to this land, as is my duty as your lord.”

“I see,” said the chief, nodding. “You have shown yourself to be a man of character—I believe you.”

Cyril smiled weakly. “Thank you, Chief. But as you can see, I’ve never had the right opportunity. I wanted to earn everyone’s trust before bringing up such a vital and delicate matter, but the Lament of Sutherland cast my efforts to the winds.”

“I see...” said the chief softly. “But that is all in the past. There are no longer secrets between us. Ah, it feels wonderful to lay bare the truth. Our people are quite terrible at keeping secrets, you see. We can’t help but feel the urge to spill everything. We even limited the number of people who gather deep-sea shellfish so that only a few of us *had* to bear any secrets.” He smiled, relieved. “Her Holiness’s personal knight was one of the former islander peoples. We’ve been proud of that fact for the longest time. That is why we wish for Captain Kurtis to be our representative and protect Her Holiness for us, alongside yourself, her sworn protector.”

The townspeople began to speak up, supporting the chief’s words.

“Yeah! Please take Captain Kurtis with you as the protector of Her Holiness!”

“Protect her well, Captain Kurtis!”

“I shall,” said Kurtis before Cyril could get in a word edgewise. Surprised, I looked up at Kurtis and saw a thoroughly content look on his face.

Wait...Captain Kurtis is leaving Sutherland and coming back with me to the Royal Capital? Just as I was beginning to process the news, Cyril broke in with an objection.

“Hold on, Kurtis! This is not such a simple matter. If Sutherland does indeed become a source of holy stones, its importance to the kingdom will only grow. We can’t have the knight captain leave this place unguarded.”

Completely composed, Kurtis replied, “Just promote vice-captain Cody to my station. His skill with the sword is greater than mine.” He added, under his breath, “At least, so it was *before* I regained my past life’s memories.”

Cyril’s eye twitched, and he continued to try and reason with Kurtis. “There are other issues. Take, for instance, the fact that there are no vacant knight captain positions in the Royal Capital. It will be difficult for you to maintain your rank.”

He was clearly implying demotion, but Kurtis remained unfazed. “Actually, I’ve been thinking of stepping down from the rank of knight captain for a while. My assignment as knight captain of this area was a bit of a special case, after all,

so I'd like to start over as an ordinary knight in the Royal Capital. In the same brigade as Lady Fi."

Cyril narrowed his eyes wearily. "You too, Kurtis?"

"I'm sorry?" Kurtis replied.

"I had this same exact conversation with another knight captain not so long ago. You're not the only knight captain who wanted to leave their post to join Fia's brigade." Cyril put his hand to his forehead and sighed.

I looked at him, wondering who that other knight captain might be. *Do I know anyone who's fawning all over me and stuff like Kurtis? Can't think of anybody. Oh, wait, duh! Captain Desmond probably just made some weird joke around Captain Cyril!*

Cyril sent Saviz an inquiring gaze. Saviz replied with a slight nod, and Cyril sighed. "Kurtis," he said, "we will make an exception and allow you to leave Sutherland, as this *is* a direct request from the chief of this land."

Kurtis grinned broadly, causing Cyril to raise his voice.

"*However!* Your official position will be decided at a later date. Cody will temporarily act as a standin for you, but you will keep your rank as you leave for the Royal Capital. Understood?"

Kurtis nodded firmly, then performed the knight salute to Saviz and Cyril. "Thank you for hearing out my request. I swear to put everything I have into serving the Knight Brigade."

Cyril gave him a curt nod and looked to the chief. "Seeing as the people of Sutherland and Kurtis himself wish it, we shall bring him with us to the Royal Capital. I'll see to it that he's assigned the same duties as Fia as much as possible. I'll also ensure Sutherland is well protected by knights to make up for his absence."

Grateful, the chief bowed his head. "Thank you for entertaining our selfish request. Captain Kurtis, we leave Miss Fia in your capable hands."

The townspeople spoke up then, addressing Kurtis as well.

"Captain Kurtis, please take care of Her Holiness for us!"

“Please keep her safe!”

I blinked, dazed, watching everything unfold around me.

Things had happened so fast that I was still catching up, but it seemed Kurtis really was coming to the Royal Capital with us. From what I could gather, it sounded like Kurtis had run circles around Cyril, leaving the latter no choice but to let Kurtis leave Sutherland, and all with the backing of the townspeople. Pretty impressive!

Wait a minute. I made a promise with Captain Kurtis the other day, right? Yeah, I promised that if he got assigned to the First Knight Brigade in a natural manner, I'd allow him to serve me...so... Uh-oh. The Sutherland people were the ones who brought the issue up, so... yikes! This definitely counts as “in a natural manner.” I'll bet Kurtis put the chief up to this! Or maybe he appealed to them because he was an islander in the past life to make this happen! How else could this all line up so perfectly for him? Gaaah, that's gotta be it! He knew I couldn't go against these people! Why did I make a promise to this conniving schemer?!

With such thoughts running through my mind, I looked at Kurtis.

“Is something the matter, Lady Fi?” he asked.

“Kurtis, do you really want to be with me so badly that you'd quit your position?”

He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Well, yes, I suppose. I was heartbroken to see Captain Cyril take the position as your personal knight from me. It would also be rather uncomfortable to have a rank above yours, so I would like to leave my post.”

I stared at him, trying to figure out if he was lying, when he suddenly met my gaze and squinted as though looking into the sun.

“Lady Fi, I care not for my position. I care not whether I am your personal knight or not. Simply allow me to be by your side and protect you. And this time, I *shall* protect you from everything and everyone there is in this world,” he said, his voice brimming with emotion.

“Kurtis...” I took one of his hands in mine. “Thank you for all you do for me. But you tend to get lost in your duties, so...I kind of want you to take a step

away from being my personal knight and be free.” I sighed—I already knew it was pointless to try and convince him.

His eyes went wide. “Oh! So you made everyone think Captain Cyril was the Blue Knight’s reincarnation to let me be free!”

“Well, half the reason I did that was because I thought it would be more convenient,” I said in a troubled voice. “But the other half... Yes, I wanted to set you free. Do what *you* want for a bit. If you decide, in the end, that you still want to be by my side, you can come back to me. But for the time being, you should spend some time here in your precious Sutherland.”

“Lady Fi.” Kurtis smiled happily, but he clearly had no intention of entertaining my wishes.

Ugh, now I was getting flustered. “Jeez...don’t say I didn’t warn you! I’m just an ordinary knight now! I’m hiding a lot of things and can’t act like I used to! Life with me won’t be like it used to be. Plus...uh, I hate to say it, but you’re not the sharpest tool in the shed. I mean, you’re an adult and you don’t even consider your own self-interest! Like, ever! You could afford to be at least a *little bit* calculating!”

Now I’d done it. I’d spoken my mind and held nothing back!

He seemed stunned for a moment...and then broke out into laughter. He put a hand over his eyes—he was laughing so hard now that he was crying.

“Oh, Lady Fi! I *am* calculating in my own way, and I’ve had plenty of time to think. Were I free to spend every moment of my life as I wished, I would feel that those moments were wasted were I to spend them without you. Ha ha... truly, I *must* have done some good in my past life to be rewarded with this, with you taking so much consideration for my well-being. Truly...this is all the reward I could ask for.”

I stared at him silently. Perhaps he wasn’t talking about the karma of his past life but the fact he had earned my favor and now received my attention. Certainly, I did believe he had done a lot for me.

“Yes, you did many good things in your past life. But that is the very *opposite* of a reason to take on more burdens! That isn’t a reward at all!”

“Lady Fi, when will you understand just how much I wish to serve you? Allow me to be clear: The place I myself wish to be, without a doubt, is by your side.”

“Is that right?” There was nothing more I could say. There was so much satisfaction in his words...

At any rate, Saviz and Cyril had already given their approval on the matter. There was nothing I could do to change this.

I sighed and gave Kurtis a fed-up look. “Fine. I’m sure you know what you want better than I do. And you know what? I was wrong. I said you weren’t calculating. I said you weren’t sharp. But you actually set up the Sutherland people to help you go back to the Royal Capital, didn’t you? You conniving schemer!”

“You got me,” he said, perfectly jolly. “I got the chief’s attention and used the townspeople’s nature to my advantage. Heh. See, Lady Fi? I’m truer to my desires than you think.”

So smug! “No!” I said with a scowl. “Wrong, wrong, wrong! That’s not being true to your desires at all! Being true to your desires means doing things for *yourself*! Everything you did was for me!”

Kurtis said nothing further, but he looked thoroughly satisfied. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything more either, not after seeing that look on his face. I just stared, exasperated...and a little happy.

With Kurtis and me now quiet, a comfortable silence formed between us. I was basking in that silence when a gust of wind blew by. I followed the direction it blew and met eyes with Cyril, who was in the middle of a discussion with the chief. The two appeared to be talking about how things would be handled hereafter. Cyril kept a wary eye on his surroundings as he talked, however, and his gaze met mine by chance.

What a coincidence! I gave him a happy little wave, then noticed he was staring a hole into me. Thinking he might have some business with me, I called out to him. “Captain Cyril?”

He let out a massive sigh and excused himself, then walked over until he

stood right before me.

He stared directly into my eyes. “I’m impressed, Fia. You’ve already made me, the townspeople, *and* the holy stones yours, but now you’ve gone as far as to win Kurtis’s admiration and make him want to come back to the Royal Capital with you. Even from afar, I can clearly see how taken he is with you. Just how did you manage to fascinate everyone in ten short days?”

“Uh...” If anyone’s impressed here, it’s me! Never have I ever heard such utterly uncomplimentary words framed in such a complimentary way! Captain Cyril really is the master of spin, huh?

I returned his gaze, then noticed Saviz behind him. He had a hand over the eyepatch on his right eye. Perhaps his wound ached? I watched him trace a long finger over his eyepatch and felt the gesture was familiar, then remembered he had done the same before when he was giving me my Sutherland mission.

At once, I recalled his words. *You’re still in training, so I do not want you to go there as a knight. Visit as someone who will one day become a knight. Look at Sutherland objectively. Decide for yourself who was at fault with your own eyes.*

The expression he wore then was complex and unreadable, but now I believed I understood what he was trying to say. Just like Cyril, he lamented the divide that had formed between the knights and the townspeople and wanted to do something about it.

I looked at him and smiled. *Commander, I’ve seen Sutherland. There is no one at fault here.*

Of course, I couldn’t report to him right there with all the townspeople around us—a formal report would have to come later. For now, I could only hope my smile would tell him what I wanted to say.

Saviz saw me and smiled back.

“Wha—I got through?!” I exclaimed. “Knight-to-knight communication...”

In just a month and a half since joining the knight brigade, I’d somehow matched wavelengths with Saviz himself! I clenched my hands and trembled with excitement.

Seeing me, Cyril muttered, “As unfortunately ordinary as I am, I cannot fathom what is going through your mind right now—but whatever it is, you are probably wrong.”

Rude! How can you know I’m mistaken if you don’t even know what I’m thinking?

“Heh heh, sorry,” I said, feeling cocky. “But this time I’m *definitely* not mistaken! Commander Saviz’s so receptive, he understood everything I wanted to say from a single smile! He even smiled back to show he understood me!”

“While the Commander is indeed an exceptional individual,” he said, “comprehending *your* thoughts is another matter entirely. You would do well to report to him what you wished to say at a later time.”

No matter how much I argued, Cyril stubbornly refused to acknowledge my psychic talents.

The rest of the mourning service—or more fittingly, the celebration—was lively and fun. There was delicious food, smiles everywhere, and the knights and townspeople talked freely with one another.

I kept drinking the Sutherland liquor I was being offered and ended up in a rather good mood. *Ah...this rules! Although it’s a little sad that I’ll forget all these lovely conversations come morning.*

I looked off to the side and saw a lone man loitering in the dark—Kurtis. I couldn’t make out his face very well in the darkness, but there was no way I’d mistake him for anyone else. I went over, wondering what was up, and found him quietly looking at the adela sapling I’d planted.

I was about a meter away from him when he spoke up. “Lady Fi...will you allow me to join you when you come to see this tree’s flowers in ten years’ time?”

I had been tiptoeing over to him in hopes of spooking him, so I was a little surprised he’d noticed me. “Huh? How’d you know I was here? I was using all my sneaky knight skills to creep up on you!”

“Do you seriously think *you*, of all people, could sneak up on me?”

“That’s...uh...” Having my question answered with a question confused me a bit. My mind wasn’t spinning on all cylinders, what with all the tasty Sutherland liquor I’d been delicately chugging. I left his question hanging and instead said the first thing that came to mind. “Oh yeah! Kurtis, thanks for coming back to the Royal Capital with me! I was really happy you said you wanted to stay with me, even though I said you could do whatever you wanted.”

“Lady Fi...” He seemed caught off guard by my smile and fell silent. Covering his eyes with his hand, his voice took on a defeated tone. “There you go again with another direct strike out of the blue. I never could stand up to your sudden smiles, could I?”

“Um. Hm?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. You just...never change, I suppose. Allow me to thank you as well, for hearing out my wish to join you and for accepting the holy stones from the people of Sutherland.”

“Not at all!” I exclaimed, flustered. “I’m the grateful one here. If you didn’t teach me, I never would’ve understood what the townspeople wanted and how rude it would’ve been to try and pay for the holy stones.”

He shook his head lightly. “As one of the former islander peoples myself, I got too worked up and stuck my nose where it didn’t belong.”

“But you were right, in the end. Oh, but why’d the chief want to give me the holy stones in the middle of the banquet anyway?”

He seemed to remember something and grinned slightly. “He probably intended to give you the stones regardless, but...my guess is he chose that timing because he was overjoyed to see you make such a familiar mistake.”

“Huh? What did I do?”

“The language of the former islander peoples has some unique sounds that are hard to pronounce. Three hundred years ago, you incorrectly pronounced the name of our foodstuff, *oatsun*.”

“Huh? *Oachun*?”

He chuckled fondly at my attempt. “Your pronunciation sounds a bit *off* to a native.”

“Oh, really? How difficult...” *Wh-what?! But the way he says it sounds exactly the same as the way I say it!* I tried to brush it off with a smile.

He became serious then, and his smile turned bittersweet. “Lady Fi, I sometimes doubt myself. What if the time I’m spending with you is a dream? Such feelings haunt me now and again, especially on nights such as this. Never in my previous life did I think we two could talk once more about our past together.”

He grew quiet for a moment. We stayed in silence among the din of our surroundings.

“If I could see the Black Knight here as well...” he said softly, “then surely this *would* be a dream.”

I tilted my head at the unfamiliar word. “The Black Knight?”

I knew of the Blue Knight and the White Knight from my past life, the two colors that made up the old flag of the kingdom, but this was the first I’d ever heard of a Black Knight. Come to think of it, the Knight Brigade was now called the Náv Black Dragon Knights, wasn’t it? Were strong knights now called Black Knights or something?

I blinked a few times, confused. Kurtis gave me a baffled look.

“Huh? Um...Black Knight?” I repeated.

He seemed to remember something and went silent. He slowly brought a hand up to his face and covered his mouth. Looking closely, I could see he was trembling. “That’s right...you never met the Black Knight, did you?”

His trembling only grew worse. I was getting worried now. *He didn’t drink too much, did he?* From what I saw, the townspeople kept offering him drinks one after another because he didn’t seem to get drunk at all. Maybe the alcohol was only hitting him now? “I’ll bring you some water, wait right there!”

I took off in a hurry, and missed his next words. “The Black Knight...was the strongest knight in history, driven mad by the death of the Great Saint.”

But his pained explanation faded into the silence, unheard.

Interlude:

Saliera's Determination and the Great Saint's Gift

THE DAY AFTER the memorial ceremony, I left with a small basket in hand to visit Saliera. I felt bad that I couldn't properly teach her how to make the yellow-speckle fever healing potion back in the cavern, so I wanted to make it up to her.

Thinking back, I had similar issues with other saints in my past life. Whenever I tried to teach them how I used healing magic or made healing potions, they were always so confused. "I understand what you're *saying* you do," they'd say, "but I can't for the life of me understand *how* you're doing it."

"Well, everyone's got their own ways of doing things," I'd reply. "So you should just go with the way you like." But in hindsight, they might've been trying to discreetly tell me that my teaching methods completely sucked.

How embarrassing! I can't believe it took me three hundred years to realize! I thought, as I made my way to the town's clinic.

Saliera lived in her clinic a little way away from the town. It had a lovely, scenic view. The window was open, so I peered in and saw that it was overflowing with patients, even so early in the morning. Saliera was in the middle of examining one such patient.

"Have you been missing sleep?" she asked. "Ah, your arms and legs are cold. No wonder you're dealing with insomnia. We'll give you some herbs and warm those limbs right up, all right?"

The young woman standing behind her, presumably a saint judging by her white robe, then led the patient into another room.

"Why, good morning!" Saliera smiled at the next young girl whom she treated. "Your teeth hurt? Ah, I see. You have a cavity on one of your front teeth. Let me heal that for you." She put her hand out and used her healing

magic on the girl. After a few minutes, she was covered in sweat and had used about half her magic reserves. I was worried whether she'd be fine using so much magic in one go, but she just took a deep breath and smiled when she'd finished. "There you are! All done."

This...was a problem. I knew there were fewer saints around these days, but this clinic seemed to be run exclusively by Saliera and the other woman. What could be done? I was thinking it over when, suddenly, Saliera noticed me and bolted up from her chair.

"Why, if it isn't Your Holiness! What brings you to my humble little clinic?"

"Good morning, Saliera. I hope I'm not a bother." I felt a little bad dropping by, since she looked pretty busy.

But from the cheerful look on her face, she didn't seem to mind. "A bother? Your presence is the very opposite of a bother, Your Holiness. Please, have a look around."

On her urging, I went inside. There were still plenty of patients left, though, so I decided to sit in a chair in the corner and watch as Saliera and Lisa—the other woman in the white robe, a saint like I thought—finished their work.

After a while, they got through the remaining patients. The three of us took a break then, relaxing and drinking something nice and cold. Or they went on a break, at any rate. I'd just been sitting around, so it was more like I was taking a break from my break, which...whew, that sounded pretty sad when I put it like that, huh?

"You two are really hard workers!" I was impressed with how zealously they'd treated the patients, working nonstop to help everybody.

But Saliera humbly lowered her head. "Not at all. My abilities are limited, so working my hardest is the best I can do. At least, that's the excuse I've given myself."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She stared down at her interlocked fingers. "The new yellow-speckle fever claimed many of my people, and yet I have nothing to leave to the next generation but my woes and failures. I was complacent. I should have worked

harder while I could. When I saw you, I understood that there were greater heights I should've striven for. I had underestimated the awfulness of death."

"Saliera..." Unable to bear the sight of her blaming herself, I called out her name, trying to comfort her.

But she just shook her bowed head. "I had thought I'd been pushing myself to my limit, but that was merely wishful thinking. I allowed myself to define what I could and could not do and went no further, never stopping to question."

"Don't be so hard on yourself!" Hoping to lift her spirits, I tried to sound cheerful. "Everyone has difficulties breaking away from their own time-proven methods."

Again, she stubbornly shook her head *no*. "I couldn't even reach that point, Your Holiness. I thought only of copying the prescriptions passed down from those before me, never once considering that I might develop new healing potions myself. But after a mere glance at the ailing, you were able to think up a new healing potion and brew it in just a day. Of course, the gulf between our abilities is akin to the distance between heaven and earth, but the fact that you were able to do it means it *should* be possible for me. What's more, I...am a saint."

"Yes, I know."

"And is it not a saint's duty to cure the sick?"

"Yes...yes, it is." I personally thought she was a fine saint; she was simply being too hard on herself. If only there was something I could do to help her understand that...

At that moment, I remembered the worry that had been plaguing me all night...the reason I'd come here in the first place. I reached into my basket and took out a small cloth bundle. I opened it to reveal a dozen or so of the holy stones I'd received from the townspeople and handed them to Saliera.

"Your Holiness, these are...?"



I smiled. "They're the holy stones I received from everyone here. I thought it'd be better if I leave them with you for now rather than taking them myself," I explained, suggesting that I was only lending them to her so that she'd be less hesitant to accept.

She gave me a baffled look. "While I'm grateful, I'm ashamed to say I have no use for these stones. I use up all my magic every single..." Her voice trailed off as she stared at the stones. Awestruck, she reached to pick one up. "Why, these stones should be transparent, yet they have a red shine emanating from within! And...they're so heavy, but how?!"

Her eyes went wide as she tried to lift a stone, only to find it too hefty for her. She tried again, cradling it with two hands this time, and carefully lifted it up.

"Your Holiness," she said, her voice quaking with awe, "this holy stone is far heavier than should be possible for its size. Just how much magic has it been imbued with...?"

From the sound of things, she understood that the holy stone's extra weight was proportional to the magic inside it.

Gauging her expression, I carefully answered, "Oh, I don't know...maybe about, uh...thirty times your capacity?" I tried to make my answer ambiguous to lessen her shock, but she nevertheless let out a truly enormous breath.

"The equivalent of a month of my magic?! And twelve stones worth! Your Holiness only received these holy stones last night, yet you somehow put a year's worth of my magic into them! And you don't seem tired in the slightest..."

"S-Saliera?" I said worriedly.

Her voice was getting quieter and quieter, but she snapped back to attention and gave me a firm look. "I see... Indeed, I understand now. I had thought your greatness was a level obtainable of any saint who worked hard enough, but I was mistaken. The Great Saint exists in a realm above her fellows."

"N-n-not at all! We're not so different, you and I, really!"

Back in the cavern when we made the special healing potion, Saliera figured

out I had powers befitting the Great Saint, but she also understood that I was trying to hide it. She'd offered to help me hide my secret, covering for me by claiming she made the healing potion. In other words, I'd reckoned she already had a decent grasp on my saint powers, but...I guess not.

Seeing the confusion on my face, she politely explained. "Of course, I *believed* that I understood the extent of your powers when I saw you make the special healing potion, but...no, my own ability came up so short that I couldn't even comprehend the brilliance of what I'd witnessed. Thank you for making the difference between us clear by quantifying it with simple, easy-to-understand numbers."

I didn't like where this was going. "No, that's, uh...i-it's all because I got drunk last night and slept like a log! I woke up feeling suuuper refreshed in the morning! That's why I could use so much magic!" It was the first excuse I could come up with, okay?

"Oh, but I'm sure your magical output is extraordinary regardless of your condition," she countered, a serious look in her eyes. "Your Holiness, thank you dearly for these unimaginably valuable holy stones... The significance of this gesture, amid all your efforts to hide your great power, is not lost on me."

"Th-thank you for saying so, Saliera." *You really are a wonderful saint.*

A bit restlessly, she examined the holy stone in her hands. "Incidentally, Your Holiness, I was under the impression that these stones could only store a few saints' worth of magic, but you've stored thirty times my capacity? How is that possible?"

She asked the question as a saint would, so I responded as a saint myself. The other townspeople only had a faint inkling that I was a saint, so I had to hide that from them, but it was far too late for that with Saliera. Plus, she was keeping my secret, so this was the least I could do in return.

"I did it by compressing my magic," I said. "I just *squeeze* it like this to shrink it." To help illustrate my point, I unfolded a handkerchief and squeezed it into a ball.

She stared at me blankly. "Err...forgive me, Your Holiness. Despite having asked for clarification, I fail to understand."

“Huh? Oh. Um, Saliera? If the way I teach sucks, just tell me straight. Please?”
Blugh. And here I thought I’d explained myself really well.

“There’s nothing wrong with your teaching,” she said. “I am delighted to receive instruction from Your Holiness. I won’t forget your teachings and I shall reflect upon it to no end, sharing it with my fellow saints. Through this, I may come to understand your words as I grow as a saint. Or perhaps someone else will understand these teachings, and so a piece of your great power shall be shared with all the world.”

“Uh...huh? Y-yeah, I think I’m going to rethink how I teach after all.” I pulled out a piece of paper I’d prepared beforehand. “On that note, I realized the way I taught you how to make the yellow-speckle fever healing potion relied *way* too much on my own intuition, so I noted down the ingredients and their quantities, as well as how to let your healing magic flow.”

I handed the paper over, and she started reading at once. “My, Your Holiness! You’ve written the ingredients and their amounts down so precisely! I’m surprised you could write with such detail when it’s only been a few days since you’ve made the healing potion! Oh, but don’t tell me you went so far as to remake the healing potion in order to write this?”

She clutched the paper dearly to her chest and looked at me, alight with admiration.

“Huh? Ah, no, well, I, uh, I just wrote from memory...” I babbled, flustered. “I didn’t have any of the ingredients on hand, so I just kinda went by memory on what amounts would be appropriate. It should be correct, though.”

She let out a defeated sigh. “By memory...? I see... You exceed my expectations in every way.” She and Lisa shared a troubled look.

Sensing that the mood was off, I cheerfully tried to change the topic. “Um, oh, yeah! I didn’t know this before, since I’ve never used holy stones, but it seems they actually store the special characteristics of the magic put into them.”

“What?!” Saliera and Lisa exclaimed at once.

“My magic has a few special characteristics, but the important thing to know is that my outputs are high and my effects are strong, I guess? Oh, and these

holy stones here might all *look* the same, but their capacities vary. The difference isn't noticeable when imbuing with magic the normal way, but because I compressed my magic, there'll be a lot of differences from stone to stone."

I glanced at the two, wondering why they were so quiet, and found them staring at the holy stones with a tense look. But it didn't seem like they were going to say anything yet, so I figured I should continue my explanation.

"If you use one of the average-sized stones, you'll be able to cure medium injuries and most diseases. If you use this big one—"

"Miss Saliera! Help us!"

The door swung open, and a panicked man ran inside. Surprised, I turned to look and found a dozen or so more men running in, yelling one atop the other. They all panted heavily, and many were bleeding. One of the men was unconscious—he was carried in by a few others.

Saliera quickly overcame her surprise. "What on earth happened?!"

One after another, the men answered:

"It was a basilisk! A basilisk appeared in the forest!"

"It must've slipped past the knights! It appeared right by the forest entrance when we went to pick those herbs you asked for!"

"We blew our whistle, and the knights came to hold it back! We came straight here afterward, but..."

The men looked to their unconscious friend. His face was pale, likely from blood loss, and one of his legs was missing from the knee down. His flank was bleeding profusely from a nasty bite. Saliera was speechless, frozen with shock as she looked at the unconscious man.

"Barney tried to protect us so we could escape..."

"Thanks to him, we got away with only light injuries, but he got hurt bad..."

"Barney...ah, Barney!"

The men looked at Saliera, pleading with their eyes. From what I'd seen of her

powers earlier, healing an injury this severe was beyond her. The men likely knew this from their past experiences with her and thus didn't directly ask her to heal him. Their eyes still pleaded with her, though, asking her to do the impossible.

I took the brightest shining holy stone from the cloth bundle and approached Saliera.

"Your Holiness!" She exclaimed, remembering my presence. She looked to me for help.

I shook my head. "I will depart Sutherland tomorrow. You need to be able to handle things like this on your own."

For a moment, her face twisted with despair. She bit her lip then and pulled herself together. "Lay Barney down on a bed!" she commanded, and the men did just that.

I knew she'd pull through. She had protected Sutherland until now and would protect it still. I took her hand and handed her the holy stone.

"Your Holiness?" It seemed she was too focused on how to help Barney to understand my intent, blinking a few times as she gazed into the holy stone.

"To continue my explanation from earlier, a holy stone of this size is capable of healing critical injuries and diseases. That includes things like healing missing limbs."

"Huh...? As in...restoring them?" she asked, surprised.

I figured she was asking for clarity as a healer, so I made sure to answer properly. "Yes. It can't heal decapitation, for obvious reasons, but arms, legs, and even the torso can be healed in seconds."

"Wh-what? That's... But how?" For a moment, she seemed utterly bewildered, but she quickly gave up trying to grasp the details, shaking her head as if to rid her mind of those worries. "Your Holiness, this is all a bit beyond me, but how fresh would the missing limb need to be to reattach it?"

"You're kidding!" the men exclaimed—they'd overheard. "We left the leg back there!"

I hurriedly corrected the misunderstanding. “There’s no need for the missing limb. A new one can be regenerated.”

“A new...*huh?*” She froze over again.

I took her hand and guided it over Barney’s body. Experience was the best teacher, so I figured it’d be faster to just have her give it a go instead of trying to explain everything.

“Normally I’d try and determine the type of afflictions present and then pick the optimal phrase word, but that’s a little difficult with holy stones. I went with the all-purpose word ‘Heal’, even if it’ll lower the healing effect a bit. When you’re ready, just say ‘Heal.’ The holy stone will release its stored magic.”

She gave me a confused look, but on my urging she moved both her hands and the magic stone over Barney. “Heal!”

As though responding to her voice, a brilliant red glow poured from the holy stone and over his body.

“Huh?” She gasped.

“Whaaa?!” The men all exclaimed.

They all watched as the missing parts of Barney’s leg and torso slowly regenerated.

“Hmm, that was about five, maybe six seconds? Definitely a lot slower than directly using healing magic,” I murmured, examining the results. Everyone turned to look at me in stunned silence, their eyes like saucers.

H-huh? Oh, no, it wasn’t slow, was it? “A little slow!” I said quickly. “That’s all! I can compress my magic a bit more and maybe get it a second faster, but that’s about—”

I was interrupted by the bawling of the men, who all had tears streaming down their faces.

“Y-Your Holiness!”

“Thank you so much!”

“Barney! Thank goodness you’re all right!”

Each and every one of them fell to the floor, wailing and bawling.

“U-um, no, Saliera was the one who saved Barney!” I hurriedly corrected them, but there was no way I’d get those words out over their loud sobs.

Oh dear. Nobody’s listening. What do I do? I turned to look at Saliera, only for her to grab my hands, awestruck.

“Your Holiness!” she cried.

“Y-yes?!” I replied, swept along by her zeal.

“Thank you so very much! I am eternally grateful for these wonderful holy stones. I’ll be able to save so many more people now, thanks to them.”

“Glad to hear it! Send them over to the First Knight Brigade in the Royal Capital once they’re empty, and I’ll refill them for you.” I squeezed her hand back and smiled.

I was told these holy stones were consumable items when they were first explained to me, but I later learned that it really depended on how you used them. The stones were said to break about half the time they were charged with magic, but testing showed that cracks only appeared when they’d been filled beyond their limit. By only filling each stone to its unique capacity, they could be reused almost indefinitely. Saliera was probably just expecting half the stones to return after sending them to me for a recharge, but I swore on my name as ex-Great Saint that not a single one of them would break after a hundred—no, a thousand recharges!

Despite there being no way they could sense my declaration, both Saliera and Lisa grabbed my hands with tears in their eyes. “Your Holiness,” they cried, bowing their heads deeply, “we are truly grateful!”

“Same here!” I replied cheerfully. “It’s good to know I’m leaving Sutherland in good hands.”

The next morning, the ten-day visit for the memorial ceremony came to an end, and all of us knights and civil officials departed for the Royal Capital.

The streets had a completely different look compared to when we’d first

arrived. Now, smiling townspeople filled every inch and waved us goodbye.

Side Story:

Fia and Sutherland Souvenirs for the Knight Captains

THE PROUD ROYAL CASTLE towered over the landscape, surrounded by red flags depicting black dragons. I looked up at it and smiled.

“Heck yeah!” I shouted, unable to contain myself. “Fia’s back in the Royal Capital!”

“Welcome back, Fia,” Fabian said from behind me, grinning.

“Huh?” I spun around and gave him a look. “Uh, you came to Sutherland with me, man. Why are you welcoming me back?”

“Was I not supposed to? There’s nobody else around, so I wasn’t sure *who* you were talking to. Was I not supposed to say anything?”

“Um, *duh*.” I said, looking back up to the sky. The sun was just starting to set. If it was still daytime, there might be a number of knights left in the castle. Who knows—maybe I’d get to see some familiar faces after all this time away. At the very least, Desmond was guaranteed to be working overtime, as usual. He liked to complain about burning the midnight oil, but I kinda figured it was his fault for taking on so many projects all the time. When would he figure that one out?

I parted with Fabian and made my way to the Second Knight Brigade captain’s office with a small bag in hand. I stopped in front of the door and heard Desmond’s voice inside. Yep, he was still around after all.

“Because...Fia...always...!”

“Huh? Is he talking about me?!” I muttered.

I couldn’t hear much through the thick door, but that was definitely my name. From what I could make out, he seemed to be grumbling about something. Come to think of it, I’d been gone for about a month now. Aww, was he feeling lonely without me?

I smiled and gave the door an animated knock, then waited for his verbal permission before opening the door.

“Fia Ruud, present! I have returned from Sutherland!” I announced my return with a chipper smile. Contrary to my expectations, however, he was waiting with a cold look on his face. “H-huh? Captain Desmond?”

I didn’t expect a grand welcome or anything, but he was talking about me, so I figured he’d at least show a little warmth now that I was back. Instead, he looked ready to burst into a litany of complaints. I tilted my head. *Huh? What’s going on?*

“My, my! If it isn’t the sacred, inviolable Great Saint herself here to grace me with her presence! I see you’ve only just returned and have yet to change out of your travel garb. Why, I am most overjoyed to be the first person you’ve deigned to visit!”

His expression shifted from displeasure to a beaming smile, but I wasn’t the naive country girl I used to be—I knew what was really going on. Desmond was using that “sarcasm” thing and setting the technique to maximum power. All these polite-sounding words were *actually* veiled insults.

“Uh, Captain Desmond? You seem to be in a bit of a foul mood... Are you working overtime again, perhaps?” From what I’ve come to understand, Desmond’s bad moods were caused by sleep deprivation eighty percent of the time and hunger twenty percent of the time. I gambled on the likelier one.

“Incredible, Your Holiness!” he shouted. “You understand my circumstances perfectly! Indeed, I haven’t left this room in two entire days, if Your Holiness can believe such a thing. And you know *why* that is, Fia?”

The moment I heard his voice take on a tinge of anger, I realized this was a question I was not meant to answer. Whatever was wrong, anything I said here would only get me yelled at. The smart thing to do was to just make a strategic retreat.

Without saying a word, I turned on my heel and tried to book it—but Desmond was already blocking the doorway, my only escape route. *Gah! I missed my chance!*

Desmond glared daggers down at me. “Listen up, Fia! Do you know what inviolable means?! It means an existence so sacred that their very name must not be dishonored! For the past three hundred years, *that* is the word we’ve

been using to honor the Great Saint!” He crossed his arms, taking advantage of his height to really get some quality looming in.

Oh, he’s mad mad... He must be really tired. From my past experiences, I knew I had to tread lightly as to not incite him further.

I bobbed my head up and down in agreement. “I understand what you’re saying completely, Sir! The people of Sutherland honored the Great Saint as well!”

“No, you understand nothing! I heard about it *all*, Fia! Everyone in Sutherland thought *you* were the Great Saint? How in the world did that absurd nonsense happen?! Did you just so happen to trip on a corpse, dislodging some food stuck in their throat, and *miraculously* resuscitate them? Damn it all, you’re the main reason I’ve been holed up in the Royal Castle! You and this Great Saint nonsense! Just for future reference, how in the world did *you* get mistaken for the Great Saint?”

“Um, right. That. Well, it all started when I said a jellyfish dance was a dolphin dance.” I kept my tone as serious as possible—didn’t want him to think I was screwing around or anything—but he was unconvinced.

“What in the name of all that is holy are you even talking about?!”

“Ah...” It was no surprise he didn’t understand what that had to do with anything. I mean, neither did I.

“About ninety percent of the words that spill from your mouth every single day are utter nonsense to me, and this is no different! Just how in the world is mistaking a dance—mistaking a *dance*!—supposed to make you the Great Saint?! If it was that easy, why, *I* could become the Great Saint! Ha ha ha! Not to brag, but I can’t tell one damn dance apart from another, even though I’m an earl!”

“Yeah, that’s *really* not something to brag about. And the Great Saint’s a woman, so that’s not an option for you. Who’d even want such a rugged-looking Great Saint, anyway?” I said, then held out the small bag I’d brought with me.

He looked like he still had lots to say, but I’d be listening to him drone on for

hours at this rate, so I tried to just change the subject. He should've already had all the information he needed on the incident, so there was no reason for me to endure all this questioning. He would've summoned me to the military police headquarters the moment I returned to the Royal Capital if he really wanted information from me. Saviz and Cyril probably told him beforehand that I knew nothing, and I couldn't thank them enough.

Back to the original reason I came to Desmond's office. "Here, I brought you something as thanks for your parting gift."

He raised an eyebrow in surprise, and his mood seemed to lift. "Well, I'll be," he said with a smile. "The kid has some sense in her after all. Ha! Knowing you, though, I'll bet you brought me back some local food or something."

"I considered that, but then I decided to share some pretty stones I picked up instead." I began to take out the stones from my bag and line them up on the table.

I'd given all the holy stones I received at the banquet to Saliera, but a number of people—specifically Barney and his friends, the chief and Ariel after hearing about the incident with Barney's leg, and Saliera and Lisa's followers—arrived the next morning carrying armfuls of holy stones. They totaled two dozen, which I displayed now.

"Stones?" Desmond exclaimed, scowling like he'd eaten something sour. "Surely you jest! Oh, I've heard a report of this! Along your journey you would pick up ordinary stones and talk to yourself, sometimes even making little poems up about them. Sure, they say it's the thought that counts when choosing gifts, but you need to keep some semblance of sense when...wait... what...are...these?" He slowly approached the table, and as he drew closer, his jaw practically dropped to the floor.

"Like I said, these are the gifts I brought to share."

"They resemble holy stones, but...no...no, surely not. I heard you received some holy stones in Sutherland, but...no. These must be fakes, right?!" He shot me a look that brimmed with suspicion.

I smiled pleasantly. "They're real, of course. And chock-full of healing magic."

“What?!”

“Go ahead and choose any one you like. Who knows? Maybe you’ll get lucky and hit one of the jackpots I’ve included.”

He didn’t seem to fully process what was happening, but he reached out hesitantly and picked up a holy stone. Turned out to be a pretty middling magical stone, sadly.

“Aww, too bad!” I teased. “That one’s just about average!”

“Fia...?” he asked, sounding fearful and curious all at once. “The jackpots... what are they?”

“Heh heh, don’t be too surprised now! They’re these super awesome holy stones that can heal fatal wounds and even regenerate missing limbs!”

“Bah! To think that such a thing could exist, I—it’s absurd! How’s some dumb rock supposed to do what even the greatest saints cannot?!”

“Well, excuse me! These ‘dumb rocks’ can store the magic of multiple saints, meaning they can have miraculous healing powers far beyond what a single saint could provide.”

He swallowed. “W-w-wait, I-let me pick again!”

I pretended not to hear his pleas and left his office to look for the other knight captains.

I walked down the corridor, wondering where I could find the rest of them, when a couple of familiar faces called out to me.

“Yo, Fia! You just get back from Sutherland?”

“Heh, I thought you’d be tanner after playing on the beach for ten whole days!”

One of them told me that Zackary was in the captain and vice-captain’s recreation room, so I made a beeline there.

Perfect! The captains and vice captains hang out there a lot, so I might be able to knock out two herds with one stone...wait, is that how it goes? Two birds with

one throw? No, that's not it either...oof. I'm too tired to remember it right! Anyway, this might be my chance to catch all the captains I gotta meet with at once!

Soon enough, I wound up in front of the door to the captain and vice-captain recreation room. I could hear some voices from inside. I smiled—somebody *was* there!—and knocked on the door.

My mind wandered as I waited, and I got to thinking how there really wasn't any need to hand out all these holy stones in one day. It wasn't like the captains were under any looming danger, after all. Yeah, I'd just hand over any stones if a captain I knew was in there and then do the rest tomorrow.

I heard a flurry of rapid footsteps, and the door swung open, revealing a starry-eyed Quentin. "Miss Fia! You've returned! I am most glad to see you're in good health."

"O-oh, Captain Quentin. It's been a while." Huh. Hadn't expected to see him here. *Captain Quentin doesn't seem like the type to drink with the other captains.*

As though he could somehow hear my thoughts, he began to explain. "I was deeply saddened by your month-long absence and came here hoping to find somebody to talk about you with, but this is even better! Please, do come in."

"Huh? Uh, thanks, but I heard this rec room's off limits to anyone below vice-captain rank, so I'll pass. More importantly—"

"Hey, hey! Look who's back from Sutherland!" called a voice from behind. I turned to see Zackary standing there with bottles of spirits in his arms.

"Huh? Um, what're you doing out here?" I asked.

He nodded at the bottles in his arms. "I remembered I had some quality liquor in my room stowed away for a special occasion and went to fetch 'em. You came at a good time. Come on in and join us! I'll treat you to some of the good stuff!"

"Um, but I'm pretty sure I'm not allowed in this room..."

Neither of them seemed to hear me. I had a feeling they were already pretty

buzzed. They dragged me in, all smiles, and Zackary wasted no time pouring me a glass. “It’s good, trust me!”

I was still in a daze as Zackary sat beside me and Quentin sat across from me.

“Let us toast to Miss Fia’s safe return!” Quentin cried, clinking his glass with mine. “Glory to the Náv Black Dragon Knights!” Zackary vigorously clinked his glass with mine too. Enoch, sitting apart from our group, politely lifted his glass.

Come to think of it, we did safely finish all our business in Sutherland and return home in one piece. That certainly is something worth drinking to. Smiling now, I took a few big gulps of my drink. A delicious aftertaste rose up from the back of my throat.

“Wh-whoa! This is good!” As I savored it, Zackary topped off my glass. “Wha—thank you, but you’ve given me much more than enough already. I was only planning on stopping by to say hello.”

“Oh, c’mon, you know you want some more of this top-notch stuff. Tell you what, tell me an interesting story in exchange for the drinks and we’ll call it even. Actually, you can just tell me a normal story, because all your stories are interesting, heh! I’m sure you have a number of yarns you could spin after your month-long trip, yeah?”

By his urging, I began talking about the busy trip to Sutherland. Before I knew it, we’d made our way through all six of Zackary’s bottles. I couldn’t quite remember, but I think Zackary, Quentin, and I talked and laughed a whole lot... oh, but Enoch remained quiet throughout.

I stared at the many empty bottles toppled over on the floor. *Huh? Is Captain Zackary’s secret stash finished already?* At once, I felt drowsiness overwhelm me. “Ehe heh heh...sleepy now. Buh-bye...”

Knowing there was no fighting my fatigue, I stood to leave.

Zackary, who by all means should have been drinking for longer than me, stood up as well. “Wait, Fia. It’s late, let me walk you back. Hm? What’s this bag here for? Whoa, and it’s heavier than it looks! This yours?”

Oh, duh. That was the reason I came there in the first place! “I have gifts from Sutherland to give you all!”

“Huh? What’s a kid like you bringing back gifts for?!” asked Zackary. “And this bag’s tiny! Did you really pack gifts for everyone in this? Must be something small. You, uh, bring us some beans?”

“All you knight captains can think about is food, I swear. No, it’s not beans. It’s stones.”

“Stones?! I’ve heard Sutherland women like to adorn themselves with stones and such, but men like us have no interest in... Wait...what...are...these?!” he exclaimed when he looked into the bag.

“Bwah ha ha ha! Prepare to be amazed! These are *holy* stones! What’s more, they’ve been filled to the brim with healing magic by Sutherland’s greatest saints!” That was my cover story, at least.

Quentin and Enoch immediately perked up at that.

I took the stones out of my bag and started to line them up on the table. “It took the saints years, decades even, to slowly fill these stones up!”

More of my incredible cover story. Yeah, they were buying it for sure.

“Go ahead and pick one!” I exclaimed, spreading my arms wide. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and hit one of the jackpots, these super awesome holy stones that can heal fatal wounds and even regenerate missing limbs!”

“Fia, just what the hell?!” Zackary shouted, eyes wide with disbelief. “Was making the Black King your familiar not enough? Where in the world do you even get two dozen holy stones? Do you know what people call these things? They’re known as ‘the Lost Treasures’!”

Quentin, staring unblinkingly at the holy stones, was enthralled. “Miss Fia, these holy stones are astonishing! They hold ten times more hidden aura than a saint might...oh, and about three of these stones are particularly exceptional! Just what is with those three remarkable stones?!”

Lastly, Enoch, captain of the mage knight brigade and a man I hadn’t heard a word from all day, fell into nonsensical babbling. “Holy stones? That cannot be! Are these truly the Lost Treasures that disappeared together with the age saints? No, is that—quick, extinguish the lights! I cannot believe it, but the light coming from these holy stones is...it’s red! I knew healing magic could take on

color, but I've never seen a red so vibrant! Sutherland has deep ties to the Great Saint. Is that why they've taken on the color of her hair?"

I grinned broadly, happy that they took such great interest in my gifts. "Eh heh heh! Go on and pick one! Don't worry, even the worst of the batch can heal medium injuries, which is, uh...anything less than broken bones and missing limbs!"

"Wha?! You, I—this is way too much to just give to someone as a gift!"

"Oh, what's the matter, Captain Zackary? A gift like this is just right between good friends like us! C'mon, don't be a stranger!"

"S-somebody do something about this drunk!" the three exclaimed in unison.

In the end, the three each carefully chose a holy stone and successfully picked out all three jackpots I had prepared. Quentin took his without hesitation, Enoch figured out which holy stone was shining the brightest and took that one, and Zackary used pure feral instinct to pick one out.

Wh-whew! These three aren't to be messed with! They all found one of the jackpots in their own unique way! How incredible! And frightening! Gotta make sure not to ever get on their bad sides...

That's what I thought to myself at the time, but...I forgot the whole night in the morning, just like I always do when I get drunk.

Side Story:

Captain Kurtis Three-Round Bout

ROUND ONE: VS Cyril, Captain of the First Knight Brigade

“I AM WELL AWARE you are quite the competent individual, Captain Cyril, but are you competent enough for me to entrust Lady Fi to you?”

I paled—Kurtis rattled off something so disrespectful to Cyril as if it was nothing.

To my surprise, however, Cyril only seemed amused. “Oh? I may still be young in years, but that’s quite the forward remark, don’t you think?” He gave me a sidelong glance. “Is Fia really that important to you, Kurtis? Rather odd, I think. If memory serves, you two just met in Sutherland. That’s an awful lot of devotion you’re getting from a recent acquaintance, Fia.”

“Th-that’s...” I found myself hard-pressed for a good answer and grew more flustered by the second. How did this even happen to me? *Kurtis, this whole mess is your fault! You’re just too darn overprotective!*

To no surprise at all, given his track record as a former member of the First Knight Brigade and a current knight captain, Kurtis was given authority to oversee the King and Saviz’s guards. Typically, this meant he’d stay with the guards on-duty, but for some reason he decided to take a week off from his duties starting tomorrow. He said he was worried about me and the day-long monster hunting expedition I’d soon be going on with the Sixth Knight Brigade.

Grr...I’m a fine knight that can look after herself, you know! And the monsters within a day’s journey of the Royal Capital aren’t even that strong!

But none of my complaints got through to him. In the end, he even applied to join the same monster hunting expedition as me.

Cyril, since he was the one to process Kurtis’s request, went wide-eyed upon

realizing Kurtis was forgoing his duty to protect Saviz just to tag along with me. He soon calmed down, however, and offered a compromise. “I understand your worries, but there’s nobody that can take your place for the next week. Instead, how about I join Fia on this expedition?”

No, no, no! In what world would the captain of the First Knight Brigade protect some new recruit?! I vehemently rejected the notion in my mind...and that’s when Kurtis said what he did.

“I am well aware you are quite the competent individual, Captain Cyril, but are you competent enough for me to entrust Lady Fi to you?”

Obviously! Do you not know how strong he is? That’s what I wanted to say, but it was more than that: Kurtis’s physique was getting better by the day. He’d told me that he would train himself some time back. Perhaps he was even stronger than Cyril now? He did already have all the techniques he knew from his past life...

I was mulling that over when Cyril had pulled out the big one. “If memory serves, you two just met in Sutherland. That’s an awful lot of devotion you’re getting from a recent acquaintance, Fia.”

Of course, the answer to that question was that we *didn’t* meet for the first time in Sutherland, but actually three hundred years ago—but I couldn’t say that.

“Err, well...” I stammered, cold sweat running down my back. “When Captain Kurtis was with me in the cavern in Sutherland, all this stuff happened, and he was badly hurt by some of the townspeople. I think that experience has kinda affected him a lot. So now he gets worried about me all the time.”

Even I thought my ad-libbed explanation was a stretch, but for some reason, Cyril seemed to consider it. He brought his hand to his chin in deep thought. “I see. Well, he has every right to worry. All manner of unforeseen incidents seem to happen whenever you’re involved.”

I frowned—*how rude!*—but he didn’t notice. Nope, he just tilted his head curiously at me. He accepted some of my explanation, it seemed, but still had a lot of skepticism.

I was just about to pile on more excuses when Kurtis came to my rescue. “The people of Sutherland worship their savior, the Great Saint. As someone who lived in Sutherland for three years, I may have been swayed by their manner of thinking.”

Surprised, I looked over at Kurtis. Where was he going with this?

“Perhaps that is why I have also come to believe that even her slightest actions, even her most casual words, indicate that Lady Fi is the Great Saint,” he said gravely. “I have dedicated myself to her protection out of sheer adoration.”

Whoa...talk about thinking on your feet! I found it impressive he could come up with a convincing answer to Cyril’s question, totally off-the-cuff. Then again, Kurtis did happen to be the reason we were in this situation in the first place.

Cyril seemed convinced this time. “I can see that happening,” he said, nodding slowly. “You always were the type to mesh with your surroundings, as well as the overly dedicated sort.”

“What’s more,” Kurtis continued, “I was sent as a representative of the people of Sutherland to protect Lady Fi. I take great pride in that fact. While I do genuinely wish to protect Fia, their expectations of me to do so are just as, if not more, important.”

“I see.” Cyril seemed to accept the explanation, which made me feel a bit miffed.

Oh, you’ll accept his excuses but not mine? Sure, Captain Kurtis didn’t lie about anything, but he’s still hiding a bigger truth! It wasn’t a competition by any means, but I still felt like I’d lost, somehow.

Cyril broke into a beautiful smile. “But Kurtis, just as you’ve been given the duty to protect Fia as the Sutherland peoples’ representative, I’ve been given the duty to protect the Great Saint as the reincarnation of the Blue Knight. Not only that, but I’ve sworn as a knight to repay Fia in full for restoring the bond between the people of my duchy. I intend to see my promises through.”

Kurtis seemed to search Cyril’s expression for a moment, then he nodded. Graciously, he lowered his head. “Forgive me, I was mistaken. You are most certainly somebody I can entrust Lady Fi to. Please...join her expedition in my

stead.”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed. *Captain Kurtis—stubborn-as-a-bull Kurtis!—folded?!*

I spun around to look at him. There was a satisfied smile on his face. “Please be at ease, Lady Fi. A knight who’s sworn with this much resolve will surely see their duty through.”

Now I understood why he folded. He had dedicated himself, both in this life and his previous life, to knighthood and held others who did the same in high esteem. Just as I had my pride as a saint, he had his pride as a knight.

There was something so endearing about the sight of two knight captains able to fully trust one another, so I smiled. *Isn’t it nice that these two got through to one another?*

So...I guess that bout went to Cyril?

That’s my captain for you! I thought with a grin. That smile faded pretty quickly when we went on our monster hunting expedition and all the other knights called me insane for bringing the First Knight Brigade captain as a chaperone. But that’s a story for another time.

ROUND TWO: VS Quentin, Captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade

“**I** MAY BE THE Captain of the Monster Tamer Brigade, but Miss Fia is many times more knowledgeable than I am with regard to monsters. Familiars are more fond of her as well. I have nothing but admiration for her.”

As he listened to Quentin heap praise onto me, Kurtis smiled with amusement, as if humoring a child. “Not bad. It appears that you comprehend a small fragment of Lady Fi’s greatness.”

“O-okay, settle down now,” I said, trying to get Kurtis to chill out. With all his fondness for me, I could only pray he didn’t blab anything important.

It all started when I announced I was going to visit the familiar stables and Kurtis said he wanted to join me. I allowed it unthinkingly, but I kind of regretted it now.

We chatted like normal along the way there, but the problems kicked off when we reached the familiar stables. He went silent and started to glare as the familiars came up to me to be pampered.

“K-Kurtis?” I called out his name, hoping to ask him what was wrong...and that’s when Quentin stepped into the familiar stables and added to the chaos.

“Well, if it isn’t Miss Fia!” he called happily as he walked over to us. “Have you come to see the familiars?”

For a moment, Kurtis stared at Quentin blankly. Then he pointed at the healing potion set out in the familiars’ pens. “Quentin, am I mistaken or does the healing potion being fed to these familiars have color?”

“Ah, you have a good eye! Some saint living in the Royal Castle had the idea to mix healing potion with vegetables to make it easier for injured familiars to consume! I didn’t think it’d work at first, as most of the familiars here are carnivorous, but...” Quentin’s eyes began to sparkle. “It turned out quite effective with every one of our familiars, carnivorous *and* herbivorous! I don’t know if it’s because it fills their stomachs more or if they just like the healing potion better now. Who knows—perhaps vegetables and healing potion just taste good together! Regardless, the familiars are healing many times faster than before!”

“Naturally. The difference between the healing potion here and the slop you see nowadays is like the difference between heaven and earth,” Kurtis muttered, his mood a far cry from Quentin’s hyper-enthusiasm.

“Hm? I’m sorry, what was that?” Quentin asked.

“A healing potion of this quality would have been reserved for the royal family themselves, three hundred years ago. Finding such a potent potion in this day in age is nigh unimaginable,” Kurtis continued to mutter.

“Er, Kurtis?” Quentin gave Kurtis a look, confused by the strange nonsense he

was spewing.

Kurtis showed no sign that he minded Quentin's staring and simply shrugged. "It's nothing. I was just remarking how these familiars are treated so royally, what with their healing potion getting mixed with feed. They're certainly well loved."

"Man, you suck at explaining yourself. I can just barely make sense of what you're going on about. Still, you're completely correct! Can you believe that a saint is willing to go out of her way to create specialized healing potion for the familiars? Yes, our familiars are quite dear to us!"

Quentin was generally quite the sharp man, but he lost all his sense whenever anyone praised his brigade's familiars.

Which Kurtis seemed to be fully aware of. "So not only do the familiars lap this up," he said in a knowing tone, "but it also heals them many times faster? This *saint living in the Royal Castle* must be quite skilled, perhaps on par with the Great Saint of legend..."

He really put some emphasis on that "saint living in the Royal Castle" bit, and it wasn't hard to see why. Seemed like he'd figured out that I'd produced all this green healing potion myself, and he wasn't exactly thrilled about it.

I thought I was in for it, but Quentin suddenly interjected—it looked like he'd thought that Kurtis was trying to take a shot at the saint living in the Royal Castle, trying to say that there was no way some saint from the royal castle could do such a thing.

"Kurtis..." said Quentin tightly, "I see the three years you've spent in Sutherland has...altered your values. But you should not invoke the Great Saint's name so lightly. Show some respect."

Kurtis gave him a curt, understanding nod. "Well said. You are right, the Great Saint is a supreme existence. Not only is the gulf between her power and other saints like the distance between day and night, but she brings about *miracles* as though they were *only natural*. Hypothetically, if the Great Saint *were* alive today...all semblance of reason in this world would be turned on its head."

All the while, Kurtis stared at Quentin, but he wasn't talking to him. No, he

was *actually* making another jab at me. What's more, he was using the very same indirect method of making little jabs that Zackary had told me about! Such a jabbing technique should only be used by the finest of jabsters...and yet here Kurtis was, using a rapid-fire variation!

Yeah, I...think I'll just pretend I didn't pick up on all that. I forced a smile, hoping to gloss things over.

Quentin, who hadn't picked up on one bit of Kurtis's sarcasm, looked thoroughly exasperated now. "It doesn't seem like you've realized yourself, Kurtis, but you've changed quite a bit during your time in Sutherland. You never used to bring up the Great Saint at every possible moment!" After giving such a warning, he quietly mumbled, "But...I *do* think you're correct to worship Miss Fia."

"Huh?" Now *that* was a quick topic change.

Quentin showed no signs he'd heard me. "I believe everyone should know Miss Fia's true worth and treat her with the respect she deserves."

Uh...what in the world is Captain Quentin talking about? I wondered, shooting him a quizzical look. That was when Quentin said what he did at the start.

"I may be the Captain of the Monster Tamer Brigade, but Miss Fia is many times more knowledgeable than I am with regard to monsters. Familiars are fonder of her as well. I have nothing but admiration for her."

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Are you insane?! We didn't even have familiars three hundred years ago! Obviously, you're a hundred times more knowledgeable than me! I could complain all I wanted in my head, but nobody heard me.

Kurtis gave Quentin a satisfied nod. "Not bad. It would seem that you comprehend a small fragment of Lady Fi's greatness. Those eyes of yours serve you well. You have earned my praise."

"Huh...? Wait, you understand her greatness as well?" Quentin squinted his eyes as though focusing on something, studying Kurtis's features. "Now that I get a good look at you, there's...some other slight change. No, is it more than slight? I can't quite tell, but...no. You're not manipulating your aura, are you?"

Kurtis smiled dryly. "Oh, I understand her greatness all right," he said, only

answering the first question. “About a million times better than you could.”

Perhaps he was feeling competitive, thus the immaturity. Come to think of it, he’d taken a similar attitude toward Ariel back in that cavern in Sutherland. Maybe Kurtis had more of a childish streak than I thought?

But Kurtis turned serious then. “Allow me to thank you, Quentin. Because you have shown Fia the respect that she deserves, others think it less strange of me to do the same. I am grateful.”

Quentin shrugged as though what he did was only natural. “I’m just doing what’s right for a man in my position. She has more monster knowledge than me. She is loved by familiars. Her power is astonishing. Yes, such a person *should* be treated with great respect.”

“Indeed. But being able to discern all that without quibbling about the differences between your rank and hers...I find that laudable.”

“You think so? Well...I must say it’s a bit of a surprise that you were able to understand her greatness as well.”

“Ha ha, please.”

The two shared furtive smiles and bumped their fists together, a gesture of respect between knights.

Oooh, I see! I was worried these two would fight if they met, but far from it! They’ve found kindred spirits in one another!

And so...this bout ends in a tie. I mean, c’mon. How could it *not* be a tie when they got along so well?

I smiled, happy they weren’t at odds. After we parted with Quentin, though, Kurtis scolded me for making such powerful healing potions thoughtlessly. In the end, I had to spill the beans about the whole green healing potion spring debacle, but that was a story for another time.

ROUND THREE: VS Commander Saviz

LISTEN UP, KURTIS! Without saying a word, I communicated my will to him with my eyes. *I don't care how partial you are to me! You can't act weird in front of the Commander. You might be able to get away with it with the other knight captains, but Commander Saviz is a bird of another feather! Treat him with the utmost respect, and absolutely do not start singing my praises for no reason!*

Kurtis looked me in the eyes and returned a heavy nod, hopefully understanding my message.

It all began when I was walking down the corridor and Saviz called out to me. He was on his way back to his office and asked me to come with him. I noticed Kurtis accompanying him as a guard, but I thought nothing of the invitation itself and tagged along.

Saviz sat down on a sofa once he entered his office, and I sat across from him after receiving permission. All the guards positioned themselves either near the door or behind Saviz, including Kurtis.

Saviz crossed his legs, rested his chin against his palm, and touched his temple with his long fingers. Silently, he stared at me.

I wondered what he could be waiting for when I realized he was giving me an opportunity to make my report, so I bolted to my feet and gave the knight salute. "Commander Saviz, allow me to report the results of the task you've given me!"

He had personally given me a task—in fact, it had been here in this very room, right before I left for Sutherland. He seemed to have been contemplating something then, maybe recalling the past, as he asked me to "*Look at Sutherland objectively. Decide for yourself who was at fault with your own eyes.*"

On the night of the memorial ceremony in Sutherland, I communicated my answer through eye contact alone: "*Commander, I've seen Sutherland. There is no one at fault here.*" But Cyril said he absolutely had not caught what I wanted

to say and that I should make a proper report on a later day.

Which I guessed meant today. “You asked me to see Sutherland objectively and decide who was at fault, but I cannot see anyone at fault there.”

Saviz narrowed his eyes slightly. “I see...that’s good to hear,” he said. Though his face betrayed no emotion, I thought I could see a glimmer of joy in his eyes.

I’d only recently come to realize this, but Saviz really *liked* people! Which was probably why he took time out of his super busy schedule to leave the Royal Castle, come to Sutherland, and spend time with the locals. I’d thought that royalty wouldn’t be in a position to mingle and drink with the common folk, but I must have been wrong.

That’s when I remembered that I hadn’t given Saviz his souvenir. With permission, I sat back down and rolled up one of my pant legs. Kurtis, standing behind Saviz, seemed shocked by this and asked me what I was doing, but I ignored him and undid the string wrapped around my ankle.

A small stone fell out. I then held out that stone to Saviz with two hands. “I received many of these stones from the people of Sutherland and would like to give this one to you.”

The stone was, of course, a holy stone. This one was a special one I’d set aside before I handed out any of the other stones to the captains.

Kurtis seemed to recognize its value immediately, going wide-eyed with shock. Saviz casually reached out and tried to pick it up with his fingertips, but his eyes went wide and he instead picked it up with his whole hand. “This is a holy stone, is it not? But its weight...it is so disproportionately heavy compared to its size!”

“Huh? Oh! That’s because it’s filled with healing magic. The more healing magic in there, the heavier it gets.” *Was that not common knowledge? I mean, Saliera knew that without me needing to tell her.*

Saviz looked at me as though reading my thoughts. “I am aware that holy stones become heavier when filled with magic. As far as I know, however, no holy stone should be able to weigh this much. We’ve had saints fill the ones in the Royal Castle treasury before, but none even came *close* to this weight...

although they are rather rare and breakable, so we couldn't test very many."

Jeez, he was thorough! To think he'd run tests to better appraise holy stones...impressive. Still, I'd have to pick my response carefully. He was a perceptive man.

Still, I had the perfect excuse to gloss things over. "It seems the saints in Sutherland are well versed in holy stones and know of a special method of packing magic into them. Apparently, they used that method over a period of ten or twenty-so years for this holy stone."

"Hm. Is that so?" His expression was unreadable.

"Yes. And that's why I wanted to present you with this, the most powerful holy stone. As the commander of the Knight Brigades, I'm sure you'll get more use out of it than I would."

Plus, I was a saint. I could use many times more powerful healing magic whenever I wanted, no holy stone required.

I thought my confident answer had done the trick, but he continued to question me. "Fia, how powerful do you think a stone of this weight might be?"

"Oh, don't worry, I made sure to ask. Apparently, it can heal everyone in a five-meter radius from the holder. Its effects depend on how many people are in range, but it should be able to heal just about everything for, say, ten people?"

"Unbelievable," he muttered, looking up to the ceiling in disbelief. "You need multiple saints to heal a single injury, yet you say this stone alone can heal so many?"

He shut his eyes and shook his head, as though unable to allow himself to believe what he heard. Ack. Had I overdone it? Now I was starting to panic.

"O-oh, yeah!" I said. "You know, they *did* also say this holy stone was some kind of once-in-a-hundred-years masterpiece! This is the only stone able to heal in an area!"

"How are they able to know its effects if it's one of a kind?"

"Huh? Th-that's a good question. Great, even! So, y'know, come to think of it,

what they *actually* said was that this is the only stone they had *left* that could heal in an area. There used to be many other stones like it, but they were all used up over the past hundred years. There's a whole lot of backstory going on there. Can't get into it!"

To cover up my lies, I had to create more lies, creating a never-ending vicious cycle of lying. *Why is the Commander so perceptive?!* I thought as I clenched my jaw tight, resolving not to answer anything more than *exactly* what he asked, lest my fabrications spin out of control.

He seemed to think for a short while, then looked at me and brushed his eyepatch with his long fingers. "Common sense tends to falter whenever you're involved. I called you here to listen to your report, and instead I've wound up with an item of unimaginable value right here in my hands."

"I-It sure does seem that way! Although I'm just distributing what I got from the people of Sutherland." I smiled, fully committed to playing this off.

He gave me a rather suspicious look. "You don't say." He turned to face Kurtis behind him. "What do *you* think of this matter?" He must have figured there was no point in trying to get information out of me.

Kurtis stayed calm despite the sudden question and shifted his gaze toward me. Okay, so...he was looking to me for instruction. Got it.

I met his eyes directly and thought, *"Listen up, Kurtis! I don't care how partial you are to me! You can't act weird in front of the Commander. You might be able to get away with it with the other knight captains, but Commander Saviz is a bird of a different feather! Treat him with utmost respect, and absolutely do not start singing my praises for no reason!"*

He could be rather unperceptive at times, but he was still my ex-personal knight. Plus, it had been days since he regained his memories, so he should've had enough time to make sense of it all. Yeah, he'd be able to catch my meaning for sure.

He returned me a heavy nod, as though understanding me completely, and began to speak proudly. "It comes as no surprise to me that such a powerful stone would be offered up to Lady Fi, what with her being so thoroughly perfect! Furthermore, the people of Sutherland worship the Great Saint to a

positively abnormal degree! Hence, it is reasonable that their admiration gave rise to a holy stone of this caliber! I can see it now: the townspeople must have longed to offer up the greatest possible holy stone to the Great Saint and tried over and over and over until they ended up with this masterpiece!”

“Eek!” *You, you, you...imbecile! You didn’t understand me one bit! In what world does a knight captain sing the praises of a perfectly ordinary knight like me?!*

I felt like I might pass out from pure shock, and my body was stiff as rock.

But Saviz, his expression no different from usual, merely glanced up at Kurtis’s proud face. “Indeed...? If just three years in Sutherland were enough to make you such a fervent devotee of the Great Saint, then the people of Sutherland must be devoted beyond measure. It’s not unimaginable that such a level of devotion could allow them to create such a holy stone.”

Whaaat?! It seemed Kurtis had gone so far off the deep end with his explanation that he’d looped back around and started making sense. At least as far as Saviz was concerned. *I see...so if something is too fantastical, it actually ends up sounding convincing, huh?*

With my jaw still dropped and my brain practically shooting sparks with confusion, my mouth moved on its own. “Then...I guess the winner of this bout is Commander Saviz...?”

He is the commander after all, so it only makes sense, I thought with a chuckle...which was when I noticed that Saviz was shooting me a rather exasperated glare.

He leaned in close. “No. If anybody’s a winner here, Fia, it’s you. You’ve brought me a stone whose worth is beyond imagination. There’s nothing more important to me than the lives of my knights, and now I can protect many more. As a member of the royal family, I must repay you. Tell me, what do you wish for in return?”

Surprised by both his offer and his sudden close proximity, I yelped. “Nothing! Nothing at all! I was just passing along something I received from someone else, so it wouldn’t make sense to receive something in return!”

“I see. So you can name no item of equal worth.”

“Th-that’s not what I’m saying at all!”

“Then I’ll simply borrow this for now. When the time comes that I must use it, I will come to grant whatever it is that you desire.”

“W-wait, stop! You’re not listening to me at all!”

Deaf to my pleas, he stood. It appeared it was time for the next item in his schedule.

From behind him, I could hear Kurtis murmur with awe. “I suppose the winner of this bout, as you phrased it, is *you*, Lady Fi. Splendidly done...”

“No, no, no! You’re all not understanding!” I pleaded over and over, but nobody would so much as hear me out. With Saviz gone, I was heartlessly kicked out of his office.

Days later, Saviz asked me why I had kept the holy stone wrapped around my leg.

“It’s part of my leg fat burning training!” I told him, which he met with a cold look, but...ehh. No point in telling a boring story like that, thank you very much.

Side Story:

The Captain of the Royal Guard and a Promise with the People of Sutherland

(Three Hundred Years Ago)

IF YOU ASKED someone from Sutherland who they respected the most, they would reply in a heartbeat: “Her Holiness Serafina, of course! She is the savior of our people!”

But what of the person they respected *second* most?

“Why, that would be Sirius Ulysses! He gave us our pride!”

What follows is the story of an incident that took place while both these two figures were still alive.

“Shaula! What brings you to the Royal Castle?” I, Serafina Náv, joyfully called out to my sister. It was strange for her to appear without notice, especially because she was the wife of one of our kingdom’s most prominent nobles, and I certainly didn’t recall any mention of her coming.

I looked up at Sirius beside me, as I tended to do when I needed clarification, but he simply shook his head.



Guess he wasn't informed of her arrival either...which meant she probably hadn't told anyone at all about her visit. After all, Sirius had a pretty good grasp on the Royal Castle's affairs.

"Oh dear," I said, with some exasperation. "You may be a duchess now, but it's still good manners to send word before you visit. You'll worry your husband."

If anything, Shaula looked even more exasperated than I did. "So you say, but I recall a certain Great Saint departing without warning and causing Sirius quite a bit of grief."

"Huh?" Surprised, I looked up at Sirius.

Expressionless, he denied the claim. "This is just the Duchess's usual nonsense. Pay her no mind."

Hmm. You know, Sirius acts pretty normal when it's just the two of us, but he gets very distant whenever a third party is around. Shaula doesn't seem to mind, though, because she's known him since we were little. I guess that means it's not a problem?

"Anyway, Serafina," she said with a smile, "I'm here because there's something I need to discuss with you."

With that, I showed her to our closest terrace garden; people of our status couldn't talk while just standing around, after all. As the two of us sat down, maids began serving tea and Sirius positioned himself behind me.

I took a sip and glanced up at my sister. "I do always look forward to our amusing conversations," I said cautiously, "but every now and then you come up with some sort of outrageous scheme...is that what I'm in for today?"

"Scheme? Oh, goodness, I wouldn't use a word like *that*, ha ha. I simply wanted to talk about you marrying soon, that's all."

"Marrying?!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she replied nonchalantly. "I married my husband Dubhe when I was sixteen. If we factor in the year or more we'll need to plan things, you'll be past seventeen even if we hurry up with it. And yet you still haven't chosen a single

marriage candidate. Just what have you been *doing* until now?"

"Shaula...you really shouldn't use yourself as a baseline for judging others. I know you had a mountain of marriage offers that you could sift through before narrowing things down to the duke of Barbizet, and then just tied the knot like it was nothing, but..." I grimaced. "Not everyone's as popular as you. I...I haven't received a *single* marriage offer in my life."

"Huh? But...that cannot be." For some reason, she gave Sirius a shocked look

It's meaningless, Shaula, I thought. You can stare at him however long you want, but it won't change a thing. I'm just unpopular...

Contrary to my expectations, however, it seemed she *did* manage to learn something from looking at his face. "Ah...I see how it is. Indeed, Master Sirius is quite the knight, is he not? Why, he leaves not a single opening...in war *or* in romance. However..." She stared at him now, choosing her words carefully. "Serafina is remarkably slow when it comes to matters of the heart. If one were to take things at her pace, her ideal marriageable age would speed past. Time's winged chariot hurries near, does it not? I think it'd be best to take the reins rather than let it pass by, if I do say so myself."

I hadn't a clue why she was looking at Sirius as she talked, but it was clear that this was pointed advice for *me*, just stated in a bit of a roundabout manner, to be kind.

Encouraged by her support, I bundled my hands into fists. "Yes...yes, you're right! I *can* get married if I try! Thank you, Shaula! I finally understand! I just haven't been 'taking the reins,' as you say!"

Her eyes gleamed as she fought to suppress a laugh. "That's the spirit. Seeing as you've come around to the idea, how about we send you a marriage candidate from the Barbizet family?"

Sirius interjected then, clearly unhappy with all of this. "Serafina, don't be swayed by the Duchess's words. You can do the things you want when *you* want to. There's no need to rush. You have all the time in the world."

I glared up at him, miffed he could say such things like it was just common sense. *Oh, suuure. Super convincing coming from Mr. Handsome Elite over here!*

Us normal people have it different! Not that you'd understand!

“Thank you for your kind words, Sirius,” I said. “But not everybody has access to everything they want like you! If a normal person like me were to let my chance slip, it might never come around again! Goodness...I know you can be a worrywart sometimes, but sometimes you can also be a little *too* optimistic.”

I sighed, then returned to conversing with Shaula. She was always so wonderful and interesting to talk to that occasionally you'd forget how stubborn she was. Whenever she made up her mind on something, she'd see it through...no matter how much trouble she caused in the process.

And so, a month passed.

I was visiting Sirius's estate with some urgent forms in hand when I noticed that there were a lot of the dark-brown complexioned, dark-blue haired former islander peoples around. About half of them were wearing squire knight uniforms and training with swords, presumably working to become knights. The rest were wearing maid and butler uniforms, engaging in various work around the estate. Accompanying them all were the familiar faces of knights and maids I'd seen before—nobody had quit or anything; there must've just been a hiring spree recently.

“Serafina, there was no need for you to bring me these yourself,” Sirius said with an exasperated sigh as I handed him the forms.

I gestured wildly at my surroundings. “How could I not? *Every* time I come here, your estate's got something interesting going on! What's happening this time? Why are there so many of the former islander peoples?”

“I just hired some new employees, that's all. Were so many of them really of the former islander peoples? I didn't notice.” For a brief moment, his eyes darted shiftily. It didn't escape my notice.

“Sirius...what are you plotting?” I tried to pressure him into confessing, but he just exclaimed as though he'd suddenly remembered something.

“Oh! Come to think of it, the chef we recently hired was a former islander! You said you liked that one deep-sea shellfish dish, right? It's just about

lunchtime, so why don't we have some?"

"Ngh...trying to bait me with food is cheating! I'll partake, but don't you think you've pulled a fast one on me!"

"But of course. There's no way the likes of me could 'pull a fast one' on the sagacious Great Saint, nor would I attempt to do anything so cunning. It's just that you tend to become grumpy when you're hungry; really, I'm offering you food for my own sake."

The indifferent look in his eyes as he said that really got on my nerves, so I puffed out my cheeks at him as I took his offered arm. Seeing him sneak glances my way to gauge my mood every now and then was just too funny, though, and soon enough I was breaking out into laughter.

He made a troubled face, but the ends of his lips were curled in a clear smile.

We ate in a sun-lit dining room with a nice view of blooming flowers outside the window. The deep-sea shellfish were positively scrumptious. After eating, I looked at him and smiled. He knew how to run circles around people, especially me. I doubted I'd ever get the best of him. But I was having fun, so what did it matter?

A newly hired former islander maid brought us our after-meal tea. I watched her practiced movements as she poured and wondered just how long she'd been working here.

Reading the question on my face, Sirius shrugged. "We hired about a hundred around a month ago, all of them former islanders," he said casually. "We hired another hundred as squires as well."

"That's just for this estate here in the Royal Capital, right? I take it you hired many times more for your castle back in your territory?" I asked, knowing that whenever he willingly confessed something, he was hiding an even bigger secret.

He looked at me silently for some time before averting his eyes, defeated. I guess he knew I wouldn't give up until he spilled the beans. "Yes. I hired about two hundred more as servants and three hundred as knights-in-training for my castle."

“That’s quite the number! And then? I take it you’re planning on swapping them all out every year as a way to educate them?”

He gave me a blank, surprised look.

“Sirius, I *know* you don’t like to talk about your own good deeds, but I need you to tell me these things! How am I supposed to understand you otherwise?”

“Yes...yes, you’re right. I heard word of how you saved the people of Sutherland and wished to help them in my own way, by helping them regain their pride...just as you had for me.”

“Sirius?”

“There is no substantial difference between the former islander peoples and ourselves, outside of their webbed hands and them being such accomplished swimmers. But for those reasons alone, they have been looked down upon, even denied the opportunity for education. That’s why...on the orders of Canopus, a school is being built in Sutherland to increase the literacy rate and widen their options.”

“A *school*?!” One needed permission from powerful nobles to establish a school. I’d assumed there was no way Canopus would be able to establish one, no matter how much he wanted to, but I guess he actually got those nobles’ approval somehow...?

Sirius no doubt noticed my confusion but continued anyway. “In Sutherland, a minority of mainland-born people have a monopoly on the land and control the wealth through tenant-farming contracts with former islanders. I’m making preparations to transition those agreements into land lease contracts over the next year. This way, we can redistribute the land *and* give them a proper education. If any of the former islanders wish to work in the mainland, they can receive training at one of my holdings. All those already under my employ have been tested to ensure that they aren’t the prejudiced sort. And who knows? If any of them have enough talent and mettle, they may even be able to work at the Royal Castle.”

My jaw dropped at the sheer scale of the plan. He continued on still, not slowing down for me. “One day, one of the former islanders might come to hold office in the government and do still more good for Sutherland, just as Canopus

does now. All I can do is help give them a fair chance. In the end, they are the ones who will bring about their own happiness and equality. My role in this is small.”

“Th-that’s not true, Sirius! You make it sound like it’s not a big deal, but you’re doing something nobody else has tried for hundreds of years! Not just anybody could’ve come up with this plan. Heck, even if they could, only you could actually implement it. All these preparations must have taken a lot of time. You don’t even know if it’ll pan out but you’re still trying.” The way he spoke was so self-abasing that I couldn’t help but argue, even though a man like him probably already knew all the points I was making. Still, I wanted to make it clear that he was doing something amazing.

He didn’t comment on what I said, although he spoke quite firmly. “To live, one must first survive. But life doesn’t end there; one also needs the pride to raise their head high.”

I felt keenly then and there that Sirius was a man worthy of respect. He could come up with ideas that others couldn’t, implement them at blinding speed, and never gloated about his achievements.

Perhaps he is the one who can truly save Sutherland. No sooner had I thought that than I heard sobs from all around the room. I looked around, surprised, and saw the maids, the butlers, and even some young pages weeping, their hands covering their faces. Many of them had the dark-blue hair of former islanders, but there were a few blonde-haired and black-haired maids mixed in as well—the mainland-born servants were also crying.

Well...who could blame them? I’d cry too.

A teary-eyed maid from directly behind me said, through tears, “Master Sirius, thank you for showing such benevolence to our people! We will definitely, definitely, *definitely*, repay the favor one day!” The others expressed their agreement through tears.

Sirius cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable. “Yes, well. One day. No need to hurry.” It seemed to me like he didn’t particularly want anything in return, but the look on the faces of all the former islanders’ faces seemed dead set on repaying him. And who could say? Maybe they’d do something incredible

and repay him in a way he'd never expect. That'd be nice to see. Sirius was too talented for his own good—he was a one-man army that could do just about anything alone. But it was a good thing to be helped by others sometimes...just as he always helped me.

Who could say how much time had passed since then? When Sirius ate, he ate alone in a room secluded deep within his castle. There wasn't anybody he'd care to share a meal with now...not anymore.

He crunched down on something hard, causing the maids waiting at his side to jolt in surprise. Without so much as a look toward the servants' way, he spat out the object in his mouth—a holy stone. When they saw it, the maids prostrated on the floor. “Forgive us! The deep-sea shellfish we use for this dish very rarely have holy stones in them! It should have been removed, but it seems this small one escaped our notice! Please excuse this transgression!”

Sirius didn't even acknowledge the maids. Instead, he looked to a knight waiting in the wings. “Guido, you're Sutherland born, correct?”

“Yes, sir!” the knight replied. He had the dark hair and skin characteristic of a former islander.

Sirius continued, almost to himself. “The number of saints...they've continued to dwindle ever since the Kingdom lost the Great Saint decades ago. I was so foolish...my time with her was limited, and yet I did nothing even after being warned not to tarry.”

Guido said nothing. He knew Sirius' words weren't for him.

“She'd promised to visit Sutherland again,” said Sirius. “I'm sure she'd lament not being able to fulfill that promise.” “She,” of course, could only refer to one person here.

Guido remained silent, understanding just how dear and respected this person was to Sirius.

Sirius raised his gaze and looked at Guido straight on. “Listen carefully, Guido,” he said in a commanding voice. “Don't let a single holy stone out of Sutherland! And protect them with every ounce of strength your people have! I

don't know how many decades or centuries it might take, but if the Great Saint ever reappears in Sutherland, hand her the holy stones. After the saints have dwindled away, she might yet find some use for them."

"Yes, Sir! As a representative of my people, I vow to carry out your orders!"

Sirius observed Guido's earnest response, gave a small nod, and returned to his meal. He truly didn't believe that the Great Saint would ever return to Sutherland. She was gone from this world, after all. No, his words were nothing but a vain attempt to help one already beyond help, an order that could never be carried out...

And yet it *was* carried out, three hundred years hence, in Sutherland where the beautiful blue sea stretched wide—*"Thank you, everyone! These holy stones will be super useful for us knights! I'm really happy to receive these!"*—by a Great Saint who thanked the townspeople with a smile.

It took three hundred years, but the promise between Sirius and the former islander peoples had been fulfilled at last.

Side Story:

Green Emerald, Prince of the Arteaga Empire—The Greataxe of the Empire Goes on an Outing

“OH, RIGHT! I was supposed to go visit Margrave Bachem!” I exclaimed in the middle of lunch, as though I’d just remembered. My name was Green Emerald, and I was first in line to the throne.

My brother Red Ruby, the emperor, gave me a look. “What, did you forget something there?”

The two of us were sitting at a long table, eating in the Imperial Castle midday dining room. There were about two dozen chamberlains and maids attending us, their gazes now cast down—they’d sensed the foreboding mood.

“Nah. You know how the forest out that way is crawling with monsters? Well, the knights there all only use swords, so he asked me to come teach everyone how to use the greataxe a while back.” I cut a thick slice of meat and shoved it into my mouth as I talked, trying to sound as though I had no underlying motive.

My deception would work on practically anybody, but my brother wasn’t just anybody. He steeped his fingers and mocked

me. “Oh? A margrave asked you, a *prince*, to come teach them how to use the greataxe? I suppose *somebody* is getting made a fool of, wouldn’t you say?”

Impressive, Red. He didn’t fall for a single word that came out of my mouth. I put on a deliberately upbeat tone and joked, “Well, perhaps he has some ulterior motive. He *does* have four unmarried daughters—maybe he’s trying to saddle me with one, eh?”

My brother didn’t fall for it. “Is that right? I didn’t take you for the sort to knowingly leap into a trap.” He only ever said ‘Is that right?’ with such mock surprise when he was fully unconvinced. Of course, *he* knew that *I* knew that. This was his way of blatantly declaring that he didn’t believe me. Neither of us

addressed that fact, though, continuing on with the conversation as normal.

“Ha ha ha! Whatever the likes of Margrave Bachem has in store for me can hardly be called a trap,” I said. “Staying cooped up in the Imperial Castle is getting to me, though. A short breather wouldn’t be bad.”

“Yes...I see. That does make sense. A round trip from here to there would take two weeks at most, correct?”

“Yeah, thereabouts,” I answered. I stood up then, done with both my food and the conversation.

My brother called out from behind me sharply. “Come to think of it, Bachem shares a border with the Holy Kingdom of Dhital, doesn’t it? Ah, yes...and further beyond that small country is the Náv Kingdom. Now, please correct me if I’m wrong, but you wouldn’t happen to be thinking of *accidentally* crossing their borders and meeting up with Blue Sapphire in Náv, would you?”

“Ha ha ha, you’re always *such* a joker. Do I look like the kind of guy that’d enjoy sightseeing with my little brother?” All this buffoonery was meaningless, of course, and my brother surely knew that too. Just as he insinuated, my true intent was to make my way to Náv.

Seeing me not even attempt to deny his claim, he took the napkin on his lap and threw it on the table, fed up. “God *damn* it, Green! Enough of this nonsense! Why are you two so free to do as you please? Why does this damned crown chain me so? Enough of it! Rejoice, Green! I’m handing this wonderful crown, and all the history behind it, to you! Wear it with pride!”

“Oh, I could never. Somebody like me is more fit to swing his greataxe in some margrave’s territory! The crown, with all its rubies, is much more fitting for a redhead like yourself. You were born to be emperor! It’s in your blood!”

“Have you forgotten that we’re related? I could say the same for you! Listen, I’ll let you go off alone on this trip of yours. Just take me with you!”

Yeah, that’s...not happening. What kind of emperor ditches his own empire? I thought, but our nation’s proud leader showed no sign of backing down, so I decided to foist this problem onto someone else.

I looked around and met eyes with Georg, the duke of Gläser, who had just

walked in for what I assume was urgent business.

“Georg, His Imperial Majesty has just finished eating!” I shouted. “If you have urgent business for him, take him to it immediately! After all, this is our emperor we’re talking about. He’s been granted power directly by the Goddess of Creation and would love nothing more than to work till he collapses.”

“Thank you kindly for your consideration, Your Highness Green Emerald!” said Georg. It was always hard to suddenly broach one’s business with the emperor, no matter how urgent. Georg was likely prepared to wait for some time, but he beamed when he heard my words, clasping his hands together gratefully.

“W-wait, I’m not done with y—” Red still insisted on struggling, but I was done there and quickly left the room behind.

I was in a rush. Blue had sent word just that morning that he’d found Fia’s tracks, and I was itching to meet her. I did feel bad for Red and how he had to stay in the Empire, but I’d endured long enough by waiting until lunchtime to leave.

I quickly paced across the polished floor of the corridor and made for the front door. Before I had realized it, a dozen-or-so knights were following near behind. I turned around to face them.

Isn’t this a few too many? Hmm, how could I reduce their numbers? Should I say I’m going to Bachem or to Náv? In the end, I decided it didn’t really matter. Our knights were annoyingly competent and most definitely had already figured out I was going to Náv. They would prepare the proper number of knights regardless.

Like clockwork, many more knights had appeared by the time I put on my travel mantle and sat my stirrups on my trusty steed.

“We will now be heading to Bachem!” I announced. “Depending on the quality of our stay, we might not come back for a while. I’ll decide on my own schedule, so don’t you dare contact me about it...no matter what the Emperor says!” Anybody listening would understand full well that I had no intention of even stepping foot in Bachem, but I cared not and sped off on my horse.

Soon enough, the Imperial Castle faded into the distance behind me.

It felt refreshing to ride my horse. Blue skies hung above, and fields of green meadows spread all around. My forehead no longer bled, and my mind was no longer constantly fuzzy from blood loss—all thanks to a certain event only half a year ago.

“It was like a dream,” I murmured. Fia had appeared before us so suddenly, like a gust of cool wind. She smiled, unafraid of us strange and bulky men who constantly bled from their foreheads. She was bright, cheerful, always ready to laugh. The way she praised others so directly, so *unabashedly* was the only thing a bit much about her, but I now understood that was only because her words resonated so deeply with me.

The other nobles—particularly the young noble ladies—had begun to shower my brothers and me in compliments the moment Red took the throne, but my heart remained cold. Ah, to think it’d take so long for me to understand it was her words alone that stirred me so! She was special...the Goddess in human form. She had cast a number of inexplicable, miraculous spells on us as we fought a monster far superior to us, and yet she held back enough to not take the achievement of victory away. What was more, she released us from our loathsome curses after granting us victory, and all in the blink of an eye.

I felt nothing but gratitude for her. I knelt, pledged myself, and wanted to show her my gratitude for all of eternity then and there—but instead she gave us a further duty to fulfill. And so, we promised to do all we could for the Arteaga Empire.

For the first time in my life, I had a healthy body, so I used it for the sake of others to regain my lost dignity and honor. Slowly, after much work, I became a man who could stand tall before anyone. I was proud. Proud to have used so well the health Fia had granted me. But unlike my brother Red, I wasn’t emperor. And so I decided I wasn’t to prioritize helping the Empire but Fia herself instead. From the correspondence Blue sent me, Fia still deigned to take human form in this world, which meant she still had business on this mortal plane. I understood that my existence was next to nothing to her, but I still wanted to do all I could. I was only alive because she had saved me, and I believed this sturdy body she granted me was capable of anything.

I urged my horse faster and made for the closest city. Changing my clothes

was my first order of business. Fia likely hated gaudy clothing like mine. I looked down at my gold thread-embroidered garments and frowned. Fia wore something fitting for a village girl when we met her. Perhaps that was closer to her taste?

We arrived in Náv two weeks later.

“B-Brother Green...?” At an inn that doubled as a restaurant, my brother stared at me as though seeing a ghost.

I gave him a short wave from my seat. “Yo, Blue. You’re pretty close to finding Fia, eh? Exciting stuff. Let your big brother in on this, man.”

“Huh?!” He gave me a bewildered look, as if he hadn’t expected me to show up at all.

Really, Blue? How could I not? C’mon, use that brain of yours.

I beckoned him and the stoic Cesare, our knight commander, to take a seat with me. “Come, now. Sit, sit!”

Blue quickly sat down and stammered. “B-Brother Green, what are—”

“What’s this ‘Brother’ nonsense?” Had he forgotten his cover? “You sound like some well-to-do noble boy. Here I thought you were some adventurer-in-training, and now you’re pretending to be some posh kid?”

“A-at least say I look like a full-fledged adventurer, Broth—” he coughed sheepishly. “Green.”

He’d almost slipped again. *I worry for you, little brother.*

“Anywho,” I said, “I’ll be coming along with y’all on your journey.”

“Huh?” Blue showed his surprise plainly, and even Cesare went a little wide-eyed. I grinned back at them both, slowly chipping away at the Náv dish I was eating as I laid out what had happened to me till now. I explained that Blue’s correspondence had arrived just as my work hit a lull, so I got Red’s permission and left for Náv, planning to join up with Blue on his search for Fia. Of course, I omitted a lot of detail with this explanation, but none of it was *technically* a lie.

“Blue,” I said, having wrapped up my story, “what do you want to do once you meet Fia?”

His eyes widened for a moment, but he soon pulled himself together and answered earnestly. “Naturally, I wish to kneel before her and offer up my gratitude, then ask to be allowed to serve her as her manservant.”

I frowned, shaking my head. *Blue...that's just what you want. I doubt that's something Fia herself would wish for.*

“You know,” I said, after a thoughtful pause, “I’ve spent a lot of time wondering what I’ll do when I meet her, but in the end, isn’t it more important for her to do what *she* wants?”

“Which would be...what, exactly?”

“Hmm...for starters, think back to half a year ago when we first met her. Do you think it was a coincidence she called out to *us* out of all people?”

“Hm? Wait...*ah.*” He turned to face me directly, realization plain on his face.

I met his gaze, nestling my chin in my hand. “Right. There’s no way that was a coincidence. She knew *who* we were and joined our adventure as a way to test us.”

“You’re right, Bro—sorry, Green.”

“And yet she never said a word about our status. That was her way of saying she didn’t want such things to get between us. Similarly, she never once stated who *she* was, for she did not want us to treat her as the Goddess.”

“I-I see. In other words...”

“We must not kneel to her! We must not exalt her! We must not beg to stay by her side! We must not treat her like the supreme being she is! We are only to treat her like one might an old friend. Do you understand?”

“Like an old friend... Could we truly ever disrespect the Goddess like that?” I could hear the pining hidden beneath his words.

Ah jeez...he's in deep, I thought, then immediately realized I wasn’t one to judge.

“Oh, Green...just the thought of meeting Fia makes my heart feel like it’ll burst!” he said. I thought the way he blushed with such worry on his face was pretty adorable, though of course I didn’t voice that.

I looked to Cesare. “On another note, Cesare, we have a problem. Against my will, about a hundred knights came with me. I believe that makes for a grand total of two hundred or so knights when combined with yours. Normally, only upper nobility would have such a number of tempered knights in their employ, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed,” he said.

“The problem is that Fia doesn’t want our status to be so apparent, so all of these knights are only in the way. That’s why I’m thinking we should have a signal in place. If I tousle Blue’s hair, you must all disperse. There’ll be no need to protect us then, all right?”

“As you say.” Normally such an order would be unthinkable, but Cesare knew the depths of our adoration of Fia, and he readily agreed. Blue and I gave him a short, grateful nod.

I downed my glass and slammed it down on the table with a sharp *thunk*. “It’s decided, then! Our meeting with Fia isn’t our goal but our starting line! Let’s figure out what we can do for her...for our Goddess!”

Blue and Cesare gave me solemn nods of agreement.

Naturally, the person in question—Fia—was completely oblivious to all of these developments. But the meeting of the not-quite-Goddess-turned-ordinary-knight and the two princes of one of the continent’s greatest countries was only days away...

Side Story:

Kurtis and the Advice He Deeply Regretted Giving

WHEN I FIRST SAW HER, I mistook her for Cyril's mother—the late Duchess—on account of her red hair. A rather rude thing for me to do, especially given their age discrepancy, and so I apologized immediately upon realizing my mistake. But...how did I even *make* such a mistake? Yes, their ages were clearly different, but even their hair color wasn't quite the same. The late Duchess's hair was more of a reddish-orange, whereas this girl—Fia, her name was—had crimson hair like the legendary Great Saint.

"I'm really very sorry about that, Fia." I apologized again on a later date, mortified that I'd mixed up such a sacred red with a reddish-orange.

She smiled as though it were nothing, however. "Thank you, but it's not your fault you mistook my air of dignity for the noble air of the late Duchess."

"Huh? Oh, r-right..." I struggled for a response. She'd simply repeated a convenient excuse I'd given a few days ago, one I'd mixed with meaningless flattery. I had thought she'd understood that, but...it would seem her character was rather simpler than I'd expected. She accepted what she heard at face value. I worried for her, given that she was part of the First Knight Brigade, protectors of the Royal Castle where cunning and schemes went hand-in-hand.

"Fia, are you familiar with nonverbal communication?" I asked, knowing full well I was sticking my nose where it didn't belong.

To my surprise, however, Fia didn't seem to mind. "Nonverbal communication? Is that the thing where you communicate with your body?"

"Body language is a part of it, yes."

"Oh, I know all about that! There are a lot of guys in the Sixth Knight Brigade who are good at it! Not that I could ever manage something like that. It seems hard."

"So you've at least heard of it. Well, it's a pretty important skill to have. You

should learn it when you can.”

I was giving her sound advice as a former member of the First Knight Brigade, but for some reason she regarded me with shock. “Huh? Uh...really?”

“But of course.”

The First Knight Brigade was special. Protecting your VIP wasn’t enough; you had to be able to sense the implicit political problems between your VIP and other parties, then secretly report it to the civil officials if necessary. This went beyond just understanding hidden implications in words, however. One needed to also conceal that they understood something by keeping their expression stoic, for instance. Both understanding implicit meaning and body language were considered the most basic of the basics, the first thing taught to those assigned to the First Knight Brigade, and yet...

“Really? I never knew!”

It appeared this new recruit hadn’t learned of it. *How innocent of her*, I thought fondly.

Her eyes sparkled. “Body language, huh? All right, I’ll try to learn starting tonight!”

At the sight of her smile, I decided that the future was surely in good hands with passionate recruits like her around.

Oh, how I long to slap the naivete out of my past self’s fool head...

Some time passed. I regained the memories of my past life. Then, much later, I was at a celebration.

Fia flung off her knight uniform with a “*Ta-da!*” and cold sweat began to stream down my back. Over her undershirt, on her belly, she had drawn...a face?!

She stood in the middle of a group of various Sixth Knight Brigade knights, who were all beginning to clamor. “I will now show you the body language I’ve learned on Captain Kurtis’s advice!”

I felt as though a bolt of lightning had coursed through me. “*Body...*”

language?!"

She began to move her stomach, changing the expression of the face on her belly, much to the delight of her crowd, but...how do you mix *this* up with *body language*?!

Lightning quick, I took off my own uniform and wrapped her in it, then picked her up and bolted off, weaving through the other knights. Looking back on it, I don't think I'd ever moved so fast before in this life or my last.

I spent the rest of the night apologizing for allowing such a misunderstanding and pleading with her, despite knowing it was meaningless in her drunken state. "I beg you, please never show your stomach in front of others like that! Especially not in front of men!"

"Whuh? But I practiced so hard!"

"You have absolutely no need for such a skill! Earlier, you said I advised you to learn this...this *nonsense*! But I would never!"

"But you did, remember? There's no need to be so shy. You're the one who told me how important body language is, so it's only right I credit you."

"C-credit?! Please, no more. If you ever show anyone this act again, I might just die from shame."

"What?! R-really?! All right, fine, I won't do it again!"

She continued to swear she wouldn't repeat her mistake over and over, and my heart was more at ease with every repetition. Of course, come morning she forgot she swore anything at all. Her memories were apt to disappear when she was drunk, you see.

Afterword

HELLO, EVERYONE. Thank you for buying Volume 4 of *A Tale of the Secret Saint*. I hope you've all been well over the course of this recent pandemic. I can only pray things die down soon so we can all return to our normal, safe daily lives.

My lifestyle has changed a bit recently, as I'm sure many of ours have. I spend more time at home now and read more. Just the other day, in fact, I read a mystery novel. As I read it, out of nowhere, an original idea for a mystery plot device came to me.

Whoa, I just came up with my own never-before-done mystery plot device?! I could write a story using this and leave readers guessing until the big reveal!

As I read on, to my surprise, the novel developed just as I expected it would.

Ohmigosh, I might just be a mystery novel genius!

I finished the book, and lo and behold, the big reveal and culprit was exactly as I predicted.

Ha ha! Yes! I'm so great!

In high spirits, I put the book away on my shelf and...you guessed it...found another copy of the *exact same* book there. I had bought and read the same book once before. Far from a genius, I was but a silly goose who didn't even realize they were *rereading* a book.

But you know what? It's a skill in its own right to be able to reread a book and get the same enjoyment you did the first time. Yeah, let's just...go with that one. With things being how they are these days, I'd like to preserve what bits of my mental health remain.

Anyway, let's talk about the book. The Sutherland arc came to a close this volume as Sutherland fell into Fia's hands (at least, according to Saviz and Cyril). I'd like to think things ended on a good note and that the three hundred years prior part of the Sutherland story was woven in well. (What do you all think?)

I was able to get my favorite scene this volume illustrated for the cover. The color palette is simply phenomenal, and the image conveys more of the characters' joy than I thought possible. Thank you so much for all your illustrations, chibi!

Lastly, I'd like to thank you for reading this far. To everyone who worked to make this series possible and to everyone reading this series—thank you so very much.

If you would, please allow me one more thank you than usual this time. Starting this volume, the editor in charge of my series has changed. My old editor was the one who taught me my most important lesson yet—writing can be challenging, but it brings its own joys—and I'd like to extend them my heartfelt gratitude. Thank you, old editor.

New editor, I look forward to working with you from here on out.

And there we have it. I needed a lot more help this time around, but thanks to everyone, working on this book was somehow even more fun than the last.



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